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479th Fighter Group

'Riddle's Raiders'



John Stanaway

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John Stanaway
Series editor Tony Holmes

Front Cover
Future 479th FG ranking ace Capt Art Jeffrey already had a single victory to his credit when, on 29 July 1944, he was credited with downing the first jet fighter to fall to the Allies in aerial combat. Leading 'Newcross Yellow Flight', which was covering a pair of 100th BG B-17s retiring from a successful mission to Wilhelmshaven, Jeffrey and his fellow P-38 pilots from the 434th FS were holding station over the bombers at an altitude of just 11,000 ft when a rocket-powered Me 163 threatened the 'heavies' at 1145 hrs. The pilot of the German jet (almost certainly from 1./JG 400) appeared more curious than belligerent when he made a pass at the B-17s from the 'five o'clock position'.

Jeffrey, flying his assigned P-38J 42-104425 BOOMERANG, chased after the Me 163. He also tried to raise the bomber crews so as to warn them, but was unsuccessful. As he closed on the rocket fighter, Jeffrey watched the aircraft alter its course from a slight dive into a steep climb – the pilot had spotted his approach.

Jeffrey's wingman, meanwhile, was experiencing some mechanical trouble with his Lightning that prevented him from following the action until its final moments. He did, however, manage to witness the Me 163 dive almost vertically into cloud below the P-38s at 3000 ft. The rocket fighter was probably in a glide when Jeffrey commenced his pursuit, but the pilot had apparently re-ignited its engine because puffs of dark smoke began to emit from the exhaust at the base of its tail.

Once within range, Jeffrey opened fire, and he observed strikes on the Me 163 when its pilot levelled off and circled to the left in an attempt to engage the P-38. The USAAF fighter was able to turn inside the much faster jet, however, allowing Jeffrey to get in at least two more bursts that registered further hits. At an altitude of between 5000-7000 ft, the Messerschmitt 'did a wild split-ess and spiralled off in an 80- to 90-degree dive', Jeffrey noted in his combat report. He followed his target until he was forced to level off whilst still in the clouds at about 1500 ft. The Me 163 continued on at an estimated speed of 500 mph.

This brief clash resulted in Capt Art Jeffrey being credited with the

This book is dedicated to the late Gen Robin Olds – a good guy who knew how to keep the sharp end pointed at the enemy.

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first confirmed jet victory of the war, even if similar combats with the Me 163 later in the conflict would result in USAAF pilots only being given credit for probably destroying their opponent. Jeffrey himself reported at the time that he was less

than certain that he had destroyed the rocket fighter, but he was subsequently convinced he had indeed shot the Me 163 down once his claim had been reviewed by higher authorities (Cover artwork by Mark Postlethwaite)

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INTRODUCTION

By the time of the D-Day invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944, the Allied order of battle in the European Theatre of Operations (ETO) was complete. Indeed, the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) had cancelled all future flying cadet training classes and curtailed some already in progress. Amongst the final groups to reach the Eighth Air Force in the United Kingdom was the 479th FG, which had completed its training for combat in the early months of 1944. The unit was equipped with Lockheed P-38 Lightnings, like its sister groups the 475th, which was deployed in the Southwest Pacific Area in mid-1943, and the 474th, which arrived in the UK not long before the 479th.

Reaching RAF Wattisham, in Suffolk, in mid May 1944, the 479th commenced combat operations on the 26th of that month – just 11 days prior to the Normandy landings.

By the end of May 1944 the Luftwaffe was defeated, but not yet subdued. The potency of the German fighter force had begun to decline as early as July 1943 – the month that had seen the Anglo-American invasion of Sicily and the monumental Battle of Kursk on the Eastern Front. In western Europe, the USAAF's ever-growing daylight bombing campaign had forced the Luftwaffe to withdraw fighter units from the USSR and the Mediterranean to help boost the Defence of the Reich. The Allied bombing campaign, therefore, faced about 60 per cent of the Jagdwaffe's overall strength in northwest Europe and a further 16 per cent in the Mediterranean.

This was the scenario that greeted the 479th FG when it was finally thrown into action.

Combat zeal led the group's fighter pilots to set records during the last year of the war, both against opponents in the air as well as targets on the ground. Valiant warriors like Robin Olds and Arthur Jeffrey began to achieve scores that rivalled those accrued by redoubtable aces manning such legendary groups as the 'Debden Eagles' of the 4th FG or the 56th FG, dubbed 'Zemke's Wolfpack'. By the time the fighting was over, the 479th had scored more than 400 aerial and strafing victories. It had also destroyed innumerable rail and transport targets. The Distinguished Unit Citation awarded to the group just as it was converting from P-38s to P-51s attests to its record in the ETO.

During their first few weeks of combat, pilots from the 479th prepared the way for the invasion of France by flying ground attack missions, while the veteran fighter units of the Eighth Air Force ravaged an already depleted German fighter force. This duly meant that the group was not to score its first aerial victory until two weeks after the invasion. At the time, 479th pilots feared that they would be faced with meagre pickings for the remaining months of the war, and the group would be destined for a mediocre combat record. However, the combination of a fervent fighting spirit and inspired leadership determined that this latecomer to the struggle in the ETO would not only earn its spurs, but ultimately excel in fighter combat.

TRAINING AND DEPLOYMENT

Organised as early as August 1943 from cadres drawn from the 329th FG at Glendale, California, the 479th FG was officially constituted on 12 October 1943 and activated three days later. The 329th had been a Lockheed P-38 replacement training unit that had trained combat pilots and formed new groups from the middle of 1942.

By the time the 479th began preparing for combat it had the advantage of being staffed by returning P-38 veteran instructors as well as younger pilots who, although not yet blooded in combat, were well-versed in the hard-won principles acquired in the crucible of battle. Amongst the group's early instructors were Lts Joe Forster and Paul Cochran, both of whom would subsequently 'make ace' after leaving the 329th FG for frontline groups. Forster joined the 475th FG in October 1943, and he duly claimed nine kills with the group in 1944, whilst Cochran already had five victories to his name by the time he joined the 329th following action with the 14th and 82nd FGs in North Africa in early 1943.

Some of the lessons passed on to the new 479th FG pilots by combat veterans such as Paul Cochran included the importance of maintaining formation integrity of at least a four-aeroplane flight. By the end of 1943 the hard-won knowledge about maintaining sufficient numbers to assure teamwork with P-38 formations had become virtually canon law. One of the tactics developed to assure success involved Lightning elements turning in opposite directions in hard-climbing banks in order to trap any

This P-38J-10 from the 479th FG displays the markings worn by the group during the time its pilots were in training at Palmdale and Riverside, in California, in 1943-44. Both airfields usually enjoyed an arid climate, but records indicate that the winter of 1943-44 was especially wet. Lt Don Dunn of the 436th FS remembers flying this aircraft in England, thus confirming that it made the journey across the Atlantic to Wattisham in the spring of 1944 (Dunn via Blake)





Future 12-kill ace 2Lt George Gleason of the 434th FS is seen here in the cockpit of a P-38 during training in California (Gleason)

single enemy pilot foolish enough to follow an element of P-38s. The second element would slip into a firing position behind the enemy fighter whilst its pilot concentrated on the first element.

One curious tactic learned in actual combat and taught to new P-38 pilots from late 1943 onward was to dive to about 24,000 ft when attacked at higher altitudes and then turn into the pursuing enemy aircraft. It undoubtedly required nerves of steel and total faith in the P-38's dogfighting ability at medium altitude for a USAAF pilot to allow the enemy to pursue him down to a more suitable ceiling before turning a defensive posture into an offensive one.

In fact, the Lightning was at its best between 22,000-24,000 ft, where its mechanical reliability outweighed the disadvantage of an unfavourable power-to-weight ratio that made the fighter less manoeuvrable and prone to the affects of compressibility.

Combat techniques such as these were taught to a group of future 479th FG pilots from the 329th FG when they were sent to the USAAF School of Applied Tactics at Orlando, Florida, at the end of August 1943.

On the opposite side of the country, Lt Col Leo Dusard assumed command of the 479th on 28 October at Glendale's Grand Central Air Terminal in southern California just as all three squadrons – the 434th, 435th and 436th – were assigned to the group. Dusard was subsequently posted overseas and succeeded by Maj Francis Pope, who was in turn replaced by Lt Col Kyle Riddle on 26 December. It would be Riddle who would not only take the group into combat but also give the 479th its evocative sobriquet of 'Riddle's Raiders'.

The 479th received its first batch of P-38s at Grand Central Air Terminal in January 1944 when a few elderly H-models arrived to allow the group to establish some sort of organisational order. By the end of the winter there were enough Lightnings (including several J-models) to give shape to the group as a neophyte combat unit. It is believed that some of the later P-38Js were subsequently shipped to England as part of the initial combat force.

Pilots who would subsequently distinguish themselves in combat also began to arrive, including Maj James Herren, who took command of the 434th FS in December, and Lts Tom Olson, Harold Grenning and Berkley Hollister, who joined the squadron in January. Capt Art Jeffrey, who would score more aerial victories than any other pilot in the 479th, had been assigned to the 434th in October, and the ebullient Lt Robin Olds joined the unit in February 1944. George Sykes and Phil Gossard were posted to the 435th FS in January, while Lt Clarence Johnson, a veteran of North Africa who would claim the group's first aerial kill, was assigned to the 436th in late 1943, as was Lt Hans Grasshoff.

When the limitations of the field at Grand Central Air Terminal – particularly its short runways and proximity to the large population centres around Hollywood – curtailed combat training, the three squadrons separated and moved to new fields. The 434th went to Lomita, near Torrance, the 435th travelled west to Oxnard and the 436th and group headquarters headed north to the desert country of Palmdale. By the middle of February the group was ready for intensive combat training.

It was in late March 1944 that Lt Col Sidney Woods joined the group's HQ staff. He had recently been rotated home after a successful tour with

the 49th FG in the Southwest Pacific, where he had scored two victories over Japanese aircraft. Woods would go on to lead several successful ground attack missions prior to completing his tour with the 479th in late 1944. Joining the 4th FG as deputy group CO in February 1945, he would ultimately achieve 'ace-in-a-day' status on 22 March 1944 when he downed five Fw 190s. Woods was the only pilot to perform such a feat with the 4th FG.

POOR WEATHER TRAINING

March 1944 proved to be a wretched month in California for weather, as its usual mild conditions were replaced by alternate bouts of cold rain and dust storms. But the wind, heavy rain and even snow helped acclimatise 479th crews to the conditions they would encounter in the skies over northwestern Europe once the group was transferred to the UK. Like the P-38-equipped 55th FG, which had become accustomed to the cloudy and cold conditions of Washington State between 1941-43, prior to being assigned to the Eighth Air Force, the 479th would benefit from its exposure to adverse weather. Fortunately for the group's pilots, the P-38 proved relatively easy to fly on instruments, facilitating effective and relatively safe flight conditions.

Nevertheless, accidents did happen. The first fatality of the month befell deputy group commander Maj Robert Twyman, who was forced to bail out of his P-38 on 12 March but perished during the descent. 436th FS pilots Lts Henderson and Walker also died in accidents during March. There were several non-fatal crashes too, including one that saw the pilot involved parachute from his burning P-38 into the Pacific. Once in the water, he had to fend off prowling sharks until he was safely picked up.

The highlight of the month was the 479th FG's participation in manoeuvres at Muroc Army Air Field (later to become Edwards Air Force Base), which commenced on 25 March 1944. For five days the group acted as the defending force, trying to repulse attackers who had theoretically landed at Monterey Bay. Many useful mock scrambles, alerts and aerial engagements gave the pilots and crews experience of potential combat situations.

A semi-authorised activity which also helped prepare P-38 pilots for action was the occasional mock combat with US Navy and Marine F4U Corsair units based in the area. The F4U was probably the best US-built single-engined fighter in the inventory at that time at altitudes below 20,000 ft (or even higher, according to its pilots), and it routinely acted as friendly opponent for P-38 pilots over southern California. Other Lightning groups in training in the area also reported engaging the F4Us with

436th FS pilot 2Lt Gerald Mulvaney sits in the cockpit of a well-worn Lightning between training flights in California in early 1944 (Blake)





The P-38L was the ultimate version of the Lightning fighter to reach frontline service. It arrived in the ETO too late to see combat with the 479th FG, however, although a handful of pilots flew a visiting example from the 474th FG in mock combat with a P-51D late on in the conflict (*Scutts*)

satisfactory results, so it is reasonable to assume that some of the 479th pilots learned their craft during these clandestine mock engagements.

In any case, the group was preparing for operational deployment by the beginning of April on the assumption that its pilots were ready for combat overseas. During the second week of the month progressive movement to Santa Maria Army Air Base, in California, eventually brought the group together at its port of departure. For the next few weeks 479th personnel engaged in physical training and parades, as well as completing the various formalities associated with overseas movement. On 15 April 1944 the men boarded trains that would transport them to Camp Kilmer, in New Jersey, prior to being shipped across the Atlantic. Incidental training and inspection occupied the group for the rest of the month, before leave in the nearby cities of New York or Hoboken saw personnel enjoy a final 'night on the town' prior to travelling to the combat zone. Soon they would find themselves in the unfamiliar surroundings of East Anglia, with its quaint villages.

On 2 May 1944 the group arrived at Brooklyn to board USS *Argentina*, which was a pre-war luxury liner that had been converted into a troopship. The journey across the Atlantic took 12 days, so it was not until the 14th that men who had been cramped below decks were able to catch their first glimpse of the Scottish coast.

After disembarkation on the Clyde, there was a further train journey that ultimately took the group to Wattisham, near Ipswich, in Suffolk. This base would be the group's home for the rest of its time in England, and it would be the only airfield from which the men of the 479th FG would fight their battles during the war in Europe.

INTO THE FIGHT

Unlike many of the airfields specially constructed for the Eighth Air Force in East Anglia, RAF Wattisham was a permanent base that had been officially opened in April 1939. Initially home to RAF Blenheim, Boston and Beaufighter units, it became the USAAF's Station B 12 on 12 June 1942. The airfield was refurbished for use by an Eighth Air Force bomber group, with new concrete runways being laid and buildings erected. This work would take 18 months to complete, and ultimately Wattisham would be used by a fighter group equipped with P-38s, rather than a bomber group flying B-17s or B-24s.

The 479th FG enjoyed the permanent nature of the new buildings at the base, with the accommodation blocks being particularly welcome as they possessed better heating than the group had experienced at the various locations it had encountered during training in the US.

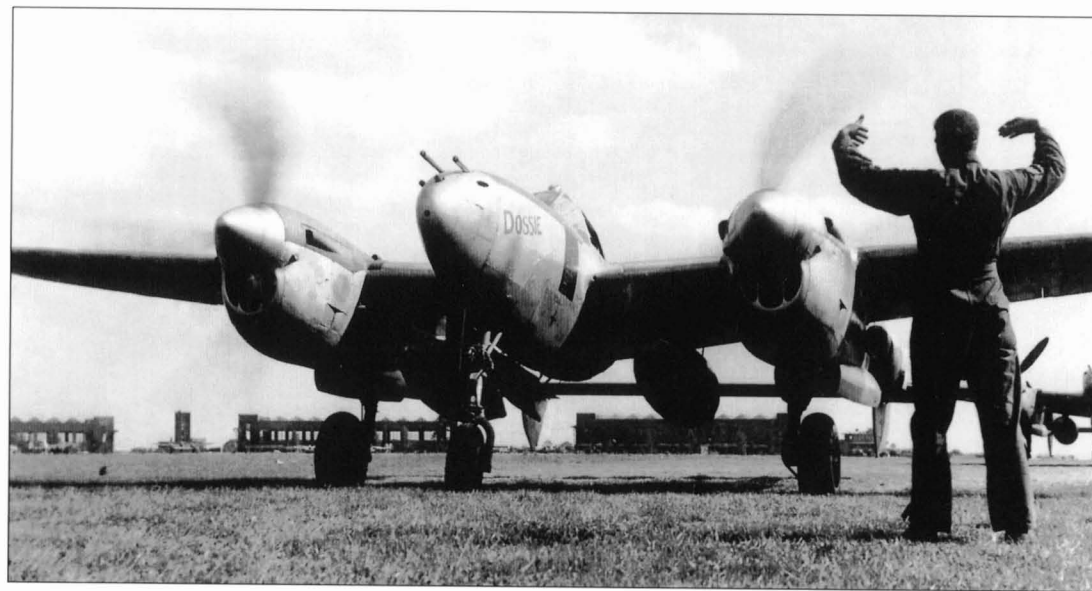
Situated between Bury St Edmunds to the north and Colchester to the south, Wattisham lies in a quiet, green corner of southern England to the northeast of London. For the personnel of the 479th FG this meant that they could savour the 'mild & bitter' beer served in local pubs, as well as the historic and bucolic charm of the English countryside when their gruelling operational schedule allowed.

Just as the 479th was settling in at Wattisham, the commander of the Eighth Air Force, Maj Gen James Doolittle, issued an order that released VIII Fighter Command from having to provide close escort for USAAF heavy bombers. This duly meant that fighter pilots could now hunt more freely than in the past. The great aerial battles of March and April 1944 had already wrested the initiative from the Luftwaffe to the point where, at times, it was unable to offer anything but a token force to engage the ever growing formations of Eighth Air Force 'heavies' that were systematically destroying Germany's ability to wage war.

The feeling amongst the 'brass' at Eighth Air Force HQ was that after the D-Day landings, shooting down considerable numbers of enemy aircraft would add little to the outcome of the war, as the fight to secure air superiority over western Europe had already been won. It is ironic,

Lt Ray Friend and TSgt James Grant of the 435th FS are pictured at Wattisham during the early period of squadron operations. Friend was credited with a half share in the destruction of a Ju 88 and damaging three He 111s on the ground at Nancy/Essay airfield on 18 August 1944. Promoted to captain whilst in the ETO, Friend completed his tour in March 1945 with 66 missions and 300 combat hours to his name (*Blake*)





P-38J *DOSSIE* (serial unknown) is guided towards its parking stand in the 435th FS revetment area at the end of an uneventful mission. Lt Chester Granville (who was later killed in a flying accident in a P-51D in September 1944) was nominally the pilot of this pristine Lightning (Blake)

therefore, to recall the vast number of German aircraft destroyed in the air and on the ground during the latter months of 1944 and the early weeks of 1945. A significant number of these would be claimed by the 479th.

Quickly settling into its Suffolk base, the group became operational within a few days. This transition to frontline flying was helped by the fact that several key officers and enlisted personnel had arrived ahead of the main body to help the group quickly settle into life at Wattisham. Leading the advance party was Lt Col Sidney Woods, who drew upon his experience of frequent unit movement along the north coast of New Guinea (a characteristic of his time in the Southwest Pacific theatre) to help rapidly set up a working base in East Anglia.

A few practice missions were flown in mid-May, usually led by veteran P-38 pilot (and future ace) Maj John Lowell, who was CO of the 364th FG's 384th FS. Lowell, who had been a P-38 project officer at Wright-Patterson Field, Ohio, prior to joining the 364th, led the 479th on a series of cross-country flights that sometimes included sweeping over the Channel coast to escort returning bombers as they headed inland to their bases in East Anglia.

The group's first offensive missions were flown on 26 May 1944, when the 479th performed two sweeps of the Dutch coastline. Some 58 P-38s were involved in total, and one of the missions was led by Maj Lowell. No opposition was encountered and all aircraft returned to Wattisham. The last of the Eighth Air Force's 15 fighter groups had entered combat, albeit in a low key way.

Although there were no casualties on this initial mission, the 479th had already experienced its first operational loss when 436th FS CO Capt Bill Walker was killed in a training accident in P-38J 42-104328 near Rattlesden 24 hours earlier.

Uneventful escorts predominated for the next few days, with Maj Lowell or Lt Cols Woods or Riddle leading the group. A pilot from the 479th finally got to fire his guns in anger on 31 May when Capt Frank Keller of the 434th FS descended to ground level near Osnabruck and

destroyed a Ju 88 that he found parked amid dummy aircraft. Hitting the fully fuelled bomber with a single burst, it erupted in flames.

D-DAY PERIOD

The war reached a critical phase for the Allies on 6 June 1944 when 'Fortress Europe' was invaded via the beaches of Normandy. Although having flown barely a handful of unremarkable bomber escort and support missions since being declared operational in late May, the 479th FG entered combat in earnest as part of this monumental undertaking alongside VIII Fighter Command's battle hardened units. The group's experiences during this period are detailed in the following extract taken from the pages of the official 479th FG history;

'For ten days, starting on the afternoon of 5 June, the group's pilots had a grandstand view of the biggest show on earth – the invasion of France by Allied forces. All day long from sun-up till after dark they cruised high over the English Channel to prevent German aircraft from getting at the endless stream of surface craft, jammed full of men and equipment, that shuttled back and forth between England and the Normandy coast.

'Long before D-Day, VIII Fighter Command had set up Plan *Neptune* to ensure strong air cover for the invasion forces. When the flash came over the teletype "Execute Plan *Neptune*", the 479th and certain other fighter groups immediately despatched aircraft to begin a patrol which, for the next 57 missions, was kept up without a halt except for darkness and weather.

'The 479th patrol was executed by all squadrons, and consisted of some eight missions a day. Two squadrons flew three missions each and the third flew two. When the time came for one squadron to return to base, it would be relieved by a second, and the second was relieved by the third,

Lt Arnold Holding's P-38J 43-28714 (he also flew 43-28729) acts as a prop for various 434th and 435th FS pilots in this photograph, which was taken between 6 and 22 June 1944. The officers on the wing are, from left to right, Lt Thomas Olson (434th), Cpts John Miller (435th) and Claire Duffie (434th) and Lts George Gleason (434th), George Hendrix (434th), Robert Hendrickson (434th), Leroy Lutz (434th) and Arnold Holding (434th). On the ground, from left to right, are Lts Keith Canella (434th), Bailey Williams, James Wallace and Jene Haas. Lutz and Canella were both killed by flak on 22 June, and Wallace also fell victim to anti-aircraft fire on 15 August (Mike Bates)



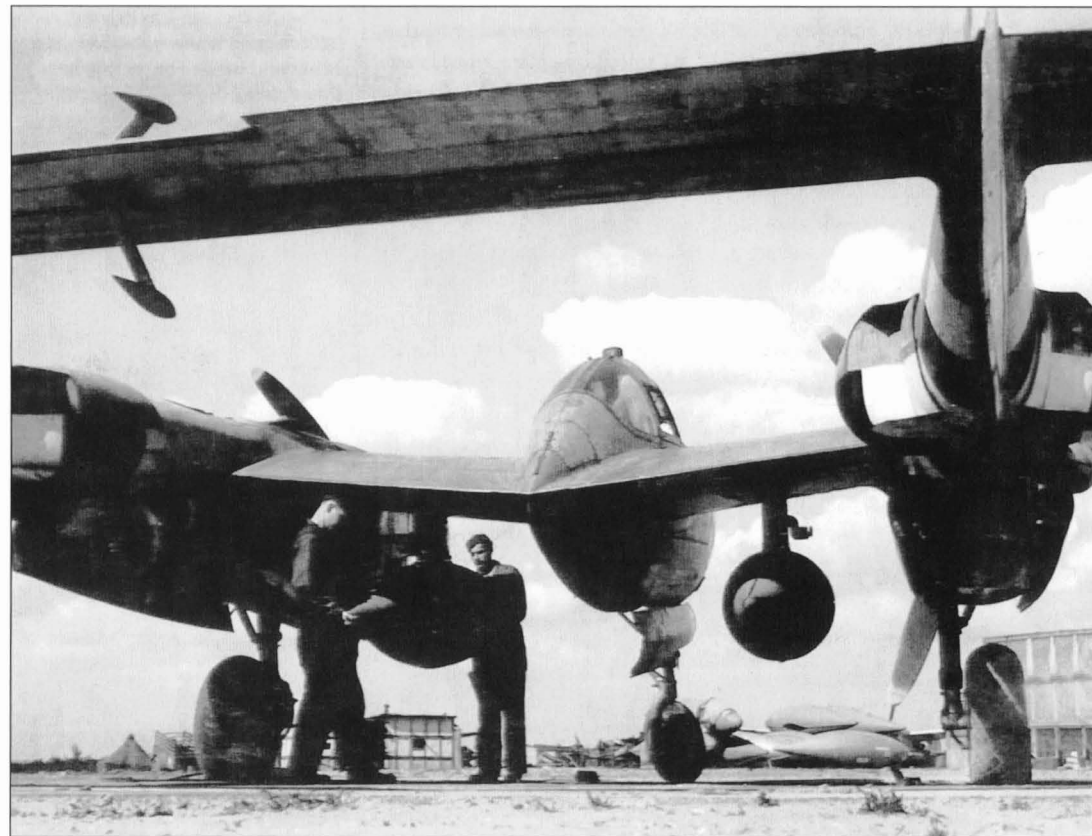
and the third by the first again. In this way a constant search was maintained for any enemy aeroplanes that might slip through other similar patrols to the south. None ever did.'

The group suffered its first combat casualty on 9 June when 436th FS pilot Lt Edward J Spillane, who was heading back to Wattisham, failed to pull out of a manoeuvre in his P-38J (serial unknown) and crashed fatally at Raydon.

In the late afternoon of 16 June, the 479th took a break from its beachhead patrol routine to escort heavy bombers that were targeting several airfields in northern France. Another bomber escort mission was flown the next day, as was a fighter-bomber attack on two road/rail bridges in the Crecy-la-Chapelle area. During the latter mission, the 479th experienced its first loss to enemy action when 435th FS pilot Capt Calvin Butler (in P-38J 44-23168) was shot down on the outskirts of Paris by flak. 434th FS pilot Lt James Ohligschlager (in P-38J 43-28729) was also lost when he crashed following a mid-air collision with another Lightning near Rennes. Both Butler and Ohligschlager were killed.

The group suffered yet more casualties through mid-air collisions on 19 June, when no fewer than four pilots were lost during a bomber escort mission over the Pas-de-Calais. Amongst the pilots killed was seven-victory MTO Lightning ace 1Lt Ward Kuentzel (in P-38J 42-104427). According to post-mission speculation, these incidents had been caused by a lack of oxygen at extreme altitude that had caused pilots to lose consciousness and fly into their wingmen. Kuentzel, of the 434th FS, was

Armourer Cpl O'Malley and Crew Chief TSgt Taydus service the external tanks of a 436th P-38J called *The Uninvited* shortly after D-Day. It may have been named after a popular film of the period starring Ray Milland, Gail Russell and Ruth Hussey (via Blake)



seen to dive into cloud at 27,000 ft. Post-war reports from French eyewitnesses on the ground at the time spoke of a P-38 breaking out of the clouds and rolling over and through the empennage of the second Lightning to appear from the overcast. Squadronmate 2Lt Frank Grdenich (in P-38J 43-28456) managed to parachute out of his stricken fighter prior to them hitting the ground near Rennes. He evaded capture.

Lts Leland K Horne (in P-38J 42-68161) and Donald McClure (in P-38J 42-68189) of the 435th FS were not so lucky, however. Both pilots perished when they collided over Murau.

On the 20th 436th FS pilot Lt Lewis Nesselbush was captured after he was forced to bail out of P-38J 42-67452 over Ottersberg when the fighter suffered mechanical failure during a bomber escort mission.

The group suffered more casualties on 22 June, with four pilots being killed during the course of Mission No 78. However, on a more positive note, the 479th at last claimed its first aerial victory, as the group history reveals:

'The mission on 22 June called for the group to dive-bomb a bridge south of St Quentin at Beautor with "thousand-pounders" and strafe rail transportation between Soissons and Rheims. Forty-nine aircraft set out on the mission and 45 came back. The scorecard showed one (Fieseler Fi 156) Storch destroyed in the air by Lt C O Johnson of the 436th FS. On the ground, the total group claims were one locomotive, one generator station, 20 box cars, three tank cars, two switch houses, one canal barge, two water towers, nine trucks and two personnel carriers with four "Jerries" all destroyed. Additional damage was done to a factory, a radar station, two oil tanks and one gun emplacement. Near misses were observed at the Beautor bridge, and the tracks leading to it may have been knocked out of alignment.

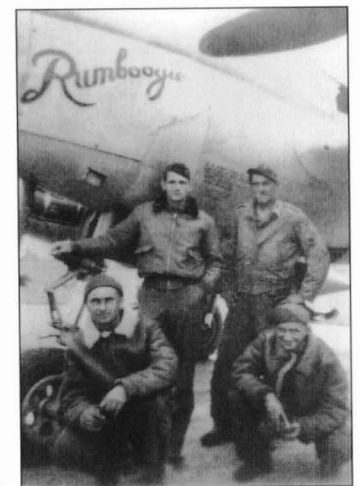
'In the 434th, Lt K E Canella received flak hits over the target and crashed nearby. Lt A S T Tucker was caught in small-arms crossfire near Cambrai and crashed and Lts Leroy Lutz and Dwight Isley simply did not return to base for reasons unknown.'

Lt Clarence O Johnson, who had already claimed two Fw 190s, a Bf 109 and a C.202 in aerial combat in the Mediterranean theatre, had surprised the Fi 156 near Reims and shot it down. His combat report noted:

'In the vicinity of Reims we were on the deck shooting at anything of military importance that we could see. As I came over a hill and pushed over on the other side, the enemy aircraft loomed in front of me. I had time for only a very short burst before I made a right turn to shoot at a train. My No 2 man, Lt Granger, and my wingman, Lt Hightower, saw the aircraft catch fire, crash and burn. I also saw the enemy aircraft catch fire, crash and burn. The enemy aircraft was at an altitude of 50 ft or less.'

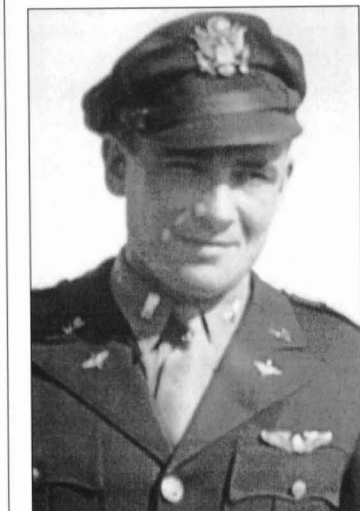
As noted, the group paid a high cost for the successes it achieved on 22 June, with the 434th FS losing no fewer than four P-38s to ground fire. The squadron's mission report provides a succinct view of these unfortunate losses:

'Seventeen P-38s armed with two 250-lb general-purpose bombs (GPs) despatched on mission. One P-38 returned early with bombs, one P-38 aborted and returned with bombs, escorted by one P-38, which dropped two 250-lb GPs on grid reference IV V G 7172, results unobserved. Fourteen P-38s provided top cover for balance of group. Aircraft ran in on



P-38J-15 43-28443 was the usual mount of 434th FS pilot Lt William J Hehn (back row, left), and he used it to claim two He 111s destroyed and a Ju 52/3m damaged on the ground at Nuneburg on 9 August 1944. *Rumboogie* was also the nickname of the fighter's crew chief (Tabatt collection)

Lt Clarence Johnson (who is seen here as a captain later in the war) of the 436th FS scored the group's first victory on 22 June 1944. This success also made him the 479th's first ace, as he had previously claimed four other kills while serving with the 82nd FG in the MTO in 1943. Johnson went on to claim two more victories after joining the 352nd FG, but he was in turn shot down and killed by an enemy fighter on 23 September 1944 (Blake)





A West Point graduate with high expectations as a fighter pilot, Lt Keith Canella of the 434th FS was killed on 22 June 1944 during a dive-bombing mission against the railway bridge at Le Fere. He was flying his assigned P-38J 43-28731, nicknamed *Sweet Mary*, when he was brought down by German flak (Tabatt collection)

target from Blankenburg at 1450 hrs at 16,000 ft. Over target, railway bridge at Le Fere (grid reference IV V N 8427), dive-bombed from 1500 hrs at 12,000 ft. 435th and 436th FSs bombed the target first but did not destroy it. 434th FS then dive-bombed the target with 14 250-lb GPs, scoring near misses. Dive-bombed from 13,000 ft down to 1500 ft, then strafed from target area, 50 miles southeast.

'Lt Canella (in P-38J 43-28731) seen to have strikes on cockpit after releasing his bombs, and crashed near target. Lt Tucker (in P-38J 43-28439), escorted by Lt Mathews, to vicinity of Cambrai grid reference IV V N 8575, where his ship was caught in crossfire, burst into flames and crashed into the ground. Very intense light flak over target area, all along strafing run, all airports in area and in small forests.'

Lt Quentin Pavlock was flying as 'Newcross Red Three' in Canella's flight, and he observed what happened during the attack;

'Lts Canella, Ilsley, Lutz and I started down from 13,000 ft, being the second flight to go down. Up till about 10,000 ft, the dive was shallow,

then, seeing that we would overrun the target, Lt Canella pushed over into a steep-angle dive. Up until that steep dive, Lts Ilsley (in P-38J 42-104258) and Lutz (in P-38J 43-28714) were in position, but at about 8000 ft, I looked over and could not see either of them, and did not see them again throughout the mission. Airspeed at this time was over 430 mph.

'Lt Canella released bombs, then I did. I was to his right, so picked a factory as target. As I started to pull out, these following events happened almost simultaneously – Lt Canella's aeroplane was hit by ground fire in the right engine, which immediately poured out black smoke; I felt my aeroplane hit and start to skid; then I proceeded to pull out. Then I looked over to Lt Canella's ship again, which was now approximately in a 45-degree dive and going slightly to the left. I observed more hits on the centre nacelle of his aeroplane, after which his P-38 remained in its dive and crashed into the ground, exploding about 100 yards ahead of the bridge on the left bank of the river. I did not see Lt Canella bail out, and I am positive he was in the aeroplane when it crashed. I pulled out on the deck, looked for the rest of the flight but could not see them, and continued on a strafing run for 12 minutes, then climbed to 10,000 ft and came on home.'

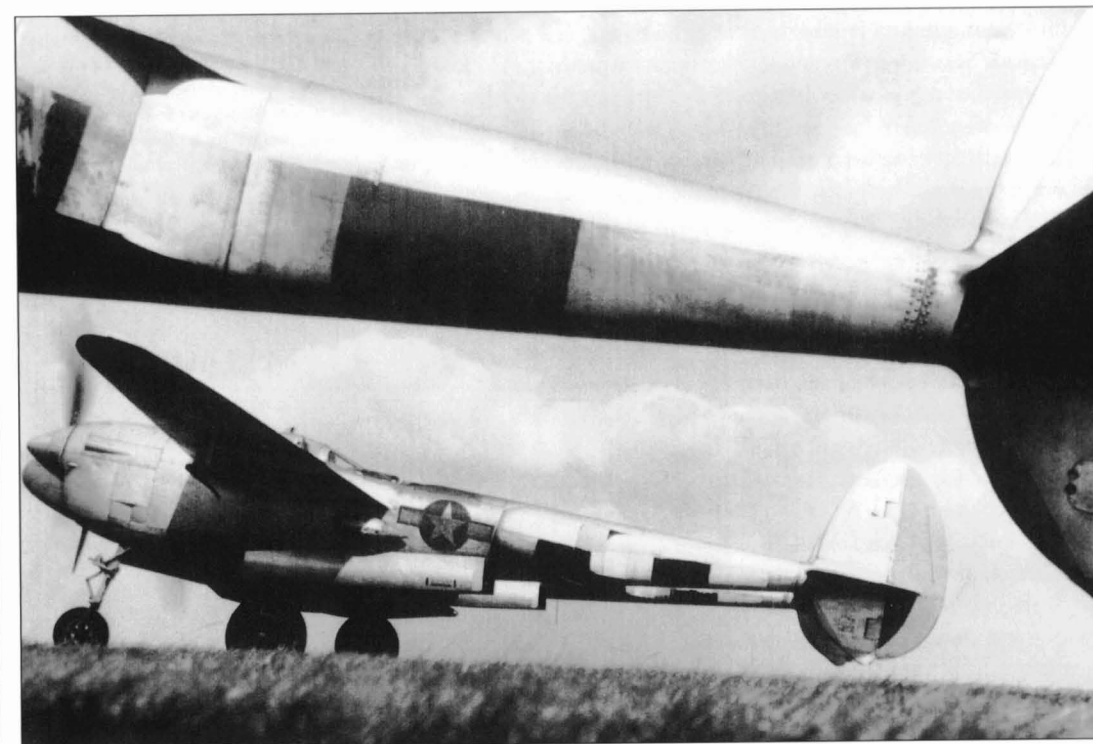
Lt Pavlock was indeed correct in assuming that Lt Keith Canella had perished when his P-38 hit the ground. His squadronmates Lts Dwight Ilsley and Leroy Lutz had also been killed.

Lt Albert Tucker was leading 'Newcross Yellow' Flight when his aircraft took hits over the target rail bridge. He was escorted out of the area by his wingman, Lt Harold 'Smiley' Mathews, but was again hit by anti-aircraft fire and crash-landed his flak-damaged P-38. Tucker was captured soon after abandoning his burning P-38. Mathews' aircraft also sustained some flak damage, but he was able to nurse it back to England and force-land at Sudbury, having exhausted his fuel.

Four losses over the target area and a fifth aircraft badly damaged in a crash landing was a predictable result for an VIII Fighter Command group attacking ground targets in support of the Normandy invasion in the summer of 1944. But it is not generally appreciated that the Lightning was more effective in dive-bombing and strafing attacks than either the P-47 or P-51. The durable Thunderbolt was legendary for its ability to absorb battle damage and the Mustang was more formidable in air-to-air engagements. But the P-38 could carry heavier loads over greater distances at low altitude, and had better survival potential than the relatively fragile Mustang. More losses were to follow, however.

For the rest of June and into July, the 479th would concentrate on rail targets by both escorting other aircraft to attack them and also striking bridges and rolling stock with 250-lb bombs. Several escort missions were flown to cover B-17s and B-24s attacking rail targets deep in enemy territory, while alternate bombing and strafing strikes were made against trains and marshalling yards supporting the German resistance to the invasion perimeter.

Two anonymous 434th FS P-38Js have their engines run up at Wattisham some time after the D-Day landings. Frequent ground attack missions during this period saw the 479th suffer heavy losses to deadly enemy anti-aircraft fire (Cook)





Lt Burton Cross (in P-38J 42-104416) of the 435th FS was killed by flak during just such a mission over Crenay on 27 June, and three more pilots were lost eight days later. Capt Robert Green (in P-38J 43-28467) of the HQ flight and Lt Rayne Fairchild (P-38J 44-23484) of the 435th FS both perished near Laval when their fighters were hit by anti-aircraft fire, while Lt Jack Denny (in P-38J 43-28367) successfully evaded capture after abandoning his flak-damaged fighter over Cande. 434th FS pilot Lt Clayton Proctor (in P-38J 42-68029) was also killed by flak near Montignac on 5 July.

Fellow 434th FS pilot Lt Flamm Harper (in P-38J 42-68147) successfully avoided being captured when he went down during an attack on the enemy's transport infrastructure on 15 July. The 479th history briefly describes the mission, and touches on the experience of Lt Harper;

'The assigned area was from Tours to Bourges, but the weather was so heavy that the group of 49 aircraft, with Lt Col Woods in the lead, had to keep on course for another six minutes before turning eastwards. Despite the weather, there were plenty of targets of opportunity to work over, and the final score made the mission well worthwhile. Destroyed – one ammo dump, one factory, one bridge. Damaged – three power stations, four bridges, one dam, two radio stations, two flak towers, two locomotives, one railway station, 11 goods wagons and a switch tower.

'Lt Frederick M Read, on arriving back in England, crash-landed his ship a few miles southwest of Canterbury, shoved his hands into his pockets and started for the nearest farmhouse. Lt Flamm D Harper of the 434th flew through the explosion of the ammunition dump and had to

This P-38J is being loaded with improvised ordnance made from Lockheed external tanks. The fins at the rear provided sufficient ballistic stability to give a reasonable expectation that the fuel-filled tanks would hit a stationary target in a fire-bombing attack (Tabatt collection)

Lt Flamm Harper's *Mary/Anna* of the 434th FS displays an early paint scheme. The aircraft was named after the pilot's wife and daughter, and it is probable that he did not expect either of them to find out that in this application their names would be separated by a nude female figure! (Tabatt collection)



Boasting full D-Day stripes, this unidentified P-38J came to grief in the Wattisham area shortly after the Normandy landings (Tabatt collection)

belly his aeroplane in near Valencay. He waved, ran like hell and came back to work in August.'

Harper was indeed fortunate to have survived the crash, and in being recovered by friendly French villagers who guided him back into Allied hands. In 1998 he wrote about the mission, and his return to Wattisham;

'We were looking for targets of opportunity when we spotted what appeared to be an ammunition dump with storage igloos covering several hundred acres. We began our attacks and, on my second strafing pass, a tremendous explosion occurred in front of my fighter. I could see concrete from the igloos blown 300 ft into the air, and my P-38 became a wreck as we flew through the debris at about 100 ft above ground level.

'When I gained some sort of control, I knew I was in deep trouble. The right engine was on fire and the left engine had a heavy vibration. Because of the slipstream, smoke from the engine fire and blood in my eyes, I had to fight to see as far as the wing tips. For all practical purposes, I was blind, and had had no visual contact with the ground since the explosion. At the last moment the aircraft rolled into a steep bank, turned left, then rolled out and went down in a meadow alongside a river. The aircraft cut down some small trees and slid into others at the far end. All this time I thought I was flying straight and level!

Harper immediately left the wreckage and was met at the edge of the meadow by a Frenchman, who took him to a farmhouse where his uniform was exchanged for civilian clothes. Several other locals drained the fuel from the P-38 and later blew it up in what must have been an area free of German troops and Vichy French.

Hostile forces did eventually arrive, but the American fugitive was hidden by his inventive new friends until he could be handed over to a



P-38J-15 43-28376 **ELBOW DOTTIE II** of the 434th FS was named in tribute to the 'Elbow Room' – a pub in Glendale, California, which was popular with squadron personnel. 'Dot' was an equally popular barmaid! This aircraft fell victim to flak near Veeingen on 15 August 1944, its pilot, Capt Hiram Turner, spending the rest of the war as a PoW (Tabatt collection)

This unidentified P-38J suffered a partial undercarriage collapse whilst taxiing at Wattisham in August 1944. Note the fire extinguisher at the ready near the left propeller spinner (Tabatt collection)



squad of SAS troops operating behind enemy lines. Harper was given a British uniform and duly fought alongside his newfound comrades until being repatriated a few weeks later. He had returned to Wattisham by mid-August to recount the unusual experience for a P-38 pilot of fighting on the very ground that his unit was attacking from the air!

ART JEFFREY'S EVENTFUL JULY

Aerial victories came on a more frequent basis for the group in July, as the 479th started to perform more bomber escort missions and its pilots began to accrue more combat experience. Amongst those to claim their first kills was Capt Arthur Jeffrey, who would eventually become the group's top-scoring ace with 14 aerial victories. Jeffrey was a steady, cold-eyed professional whose flying prowess and leadership ability had already been recognised by group commanders. He frequently led missions for the 434th FS, such as the strafing sweep the unit flew over southwest France on 4 July.

The next day saw a repeat mission to the same area, with satisfactory results against rail and other installations. Jeffrey was leading 'Newcross Yellow' Flight over an airfield near Cognac when his wingman radioed that an aircraft was taking off below them. Jeffrey's post-action report details his first aerial victory, over a Focke-Wulf Fw 200 four-engined long-range reconnaissance bomber;

'Since my flight was closest to the enemy aircraft, I immediately called Maj James Keller – "Newcross Leader" – asking him to furnish top cover while I went down for a pass at it. The aeroplane had made a 180-degree turn to the left, and was staying on the deck close to the aerodrome and town, from where they were shooting up quite a lot of flak at us. I began firing at about 350 yards, closing to about 50 yards, and giving him about a ten-second burst. The right inboard engine caught fire immediately, and parts of it flew off. The pilot of the enemy aircraft then made a belly landing, and by the time the ship had stopped skidding the whole aeroplane was ablaze. I observed one man making his escape from the front of the aircraft. By this time light and heavy flak was becoming intense, so I had to leave immediately.'

Two Bf 109s were claimed during July to give the 479th its first victories over single-engined fighters. The first was claimed during an escort and sweep mission in support of heavy bombers attacking V1 sites in the Pas de Calais area on 6 July. 'Newcross Red' Flight was jumped by a handful of Bf 109s and at least one Fw 190 near Cambrai, and a P-38 was badly damaged in their first pass. Lt John Tipps was flying 'Newcross Red Three', and he came to the aid of the stricken Lightning. Tipps stuck to the tail of a Bf 109 through several tight turns, the enemy pilot exhibiting either unbelievable courage or inexperience as he chose to make a head-on pass against the pursuing P-38. The German fighter was severely damaged for its trouble.

Luftwaffe pilots had been warned against engaging P-38s in head-on combat if at all possible due to the Lockheed fighter's concentrated, nose-mounted, firepower – perhaps the only feature of the Lightning that was universally respected by the Germans. The Bf 109 broke away, shedding pieces from both sides of its fuselage and leaving a trail of dark smoke in its wake. Tipps watched the pilot bail out. He also saw another parachute some distance away, which was probably that of his 434th FS comrade Lt Jene Haas (in P-38J 42-67732), who had been shot down by an Fw 190 near Fauril. Haas was quickly captured and made a PoW.

Another audacious Bf 109 pilot was encountered by the group on 24 July, when a lone enemy fighter attacked 'Bison Red' Flight. The Lightning of 435th FS pilot Lt Alex Evanko (in P-38J 43-28716) was shot up so badly that it crashed into the Channel south of Dungeness and its pilot was killed. Two other Lightnings from the 436th FS collided while pursuing the elusive enemy fighter, killing Capt Thomas Galloway (in P-38J 43-28419) and forcing Lt Neil Kemper (in P-38J 44-23172) to take to his parachute. The latter was lucky enough to fall into the hands of French Resistance fighters, who eventually smuggled him back to England.

Fellow 436th FS pilots Lts Hans Grasshoff and Henry Plunk made successive passes on the troublesome Bf 109 until the latter saw it stream oil and burst into flames. The fighter was subsequently seen to crash just a few moments later. Grasshoff and Plunk shared credit for the Bf 109's destruction.

'Art' Jeffrey accounted for the 479th's final aerial victory of the month on 29 July, and his success on

The proud crew chief of P-38J **PATCHES** poses alongside the fighter he occasionally entrusted to 434th FS pilot Lt George Hendrix (Tabatt collection)



this date made history not only for the group but also for the entire Eighth Air Force. He encountered, attacked and was given credit for shooting down the first rocket-powered Messerschmitt Me 163 fighter to fall to the USAAF. Jeffrey recounted the mission in the following interview given in the early 1980s;

'We were on an escort mission for heavy bombers returning to England. As I looked out over the formation of aircraft below me, I saw a crippled B-17 that was terribly shot up – pathetic, really. It had only about two-and-a-half engines running, and half of its tail was gone. The aircraft was just shot all to hell. But the worst thing was that bomber was on a northwesterly course, which meant that it would miss the British Isles completely.

'It was a grey day, and we were over Holland, which was blanketed by intermittent layers of cloud. The B-17 was steadily losing altitude. We'd found that when bomber navigators got separated from their lead navigators they had all sorts of trouble remaining on course. I called my second element leader to stay up and cover us while I went down with my wingman to give the B-17 a steer because it was so God-awfully lost. But I couldn't raise the crew on the radio – I guess all their sets were shot out.'

The aircraft in distress was B-17G 42-107007 *She Hasta*, flown by an inexperienced crew from the 100th BG. Jeffrey flew close to the damaged bomber to make hand signals to its crew. He even pulled up to show off the P-38's distinctive planform but to no avail – the neophyte bomber gunners opened fire. 'At least they were alert' Jeffrey thought. His post-action report describes the first Allied encounter with the German rocket fighter;

'My wingman and I acted as close cover, while "Yellow Three" and "Yellow Four" provided top cover. The B-17 plodded along at 11,000 ft, dodging holes in the overcast to keep out of the flak, and at 1145 hrs I observed an Me 163 in attack position behind it. The Me 163 made a slight low-side "five o'clock" pass at the B-17, followed through in a slight dive and then levelled off. At about this time the German must have seen me because he made another slight dive. He then started a very steep



Mystery machine No 1. This Lightning definitely served with the 479th FG, but there are few clues as to which squadron it was assigned to or the crew that maintained it. Possibly a camouflaged P-38H, it almost certainly served as a 'hack' for pilot training or other non-operational functions (Tabatt collection)

climb, weaving all the while, as though he were trying to see behind him. During this weaving I closed with him and opened fire, observing strikes on the Me 163.

'At 15,000 ft it levelled off and started to circle to the left, as though positioning himself to attack me. I could turn tighter than he could, and I got in a good deflection shot, with the closest range estimated to be 200 to 300 yards. I thought I was getting hits but my shots seemed too far away for effect when puffs of smoke started to emanate from the tail of the jet.

'The pilot didn't seem to know what to do in a fight – he didn't act like he had been in combat before – and at about 15,000 ft he turned and attacked, with me looking right down his throat. He was pretty green. We got into a tight circle and I saw some good deflection shots hitting him. Then he rolled over and went straight down, with me fire-walled behind him. For the first time in my life I found out how – at over 500 mph – your props can act as brakes. I was shooting at him as I was going straight down, and my tracer path was walking forward of the "bar". Then I got into an arc of an outside loop, and when I finally pulled out a few hundred feet above the ground, I blacked out.'

Jeffrey's wingman, Lt Richard G Simpson, was struggling with mechanical difficulties going into this engagement, which in turn made it hard for him to keep up with his leader as he followed the rocket fighter into a steep climb. Simpson reported;

'After about 4000 ft of climbing the Me 163 turned to the left and Capt Jeffrey attacked again. I had one bad engine and couldn't climb as fast, so I couldn't see if he was getting strikes or not. Then the Me 163 split-essed and went down into a very steep, almost vertical, dive. Capt Jeffrey and I followed, but I couldn't keep up with them. I started to pull out at between 3500-4000 ft, indicating a little over 400 mph. The Me 163 went into the clouds, which were at around 3000 ft, still in a dive of 80 degrees or better. He must have been indicating 550-600 mph, and showed no signs of pulling out. I don't see how the German could have gotten out of that dive.'

Simpson provided the primary support for Jeffrey's claim, but 479th records suggest that other members of 'Newcross Yellow' Flight also observed the rocket aeroplane fall below the cloud deck to crash. When Jeffrey recovered from his blackout, he checked the area below. Failing to see any sign of the enemy aircraft, he duly claimed a probable. However, evidence from Simpson and the others who were convinced that the strange fighter could not have recovered from its high-speed dive led to the official verdict that it had been destroyed.

The truth of the matter was that reaction-powered aircraft such as the Me 163 were sturdily constructed, thus allowing them to survive more damage than piston-engined machines such as the P-38. The Me 163 was capable of making amazing near 90-degree recoveries from dives. Every attempt to gain confirmation from contemporary German records was frustrated post-war, and some experts insist that no rocket-powered fighter was lost that day. Equally, though, there seems to be no record of an Me 163 being damaged. That Jeffrey at least damaged his opponent's aircraft was verified by several pieces of evidence.

The Messerschmitt was probably operated by Bad Zwischenahn-based I./JG 400, which had commenced operations at around this time. It is also



Mystery machine No 2. Although there is no record of a P-38 named *Piccadilly Rose* on any roster of 479th FG Lightnings, this aircraft was photographed at Wattisham in the summer of 1944 (Tabatt collection)



P-38J-10 42-68008 *Touché*, assigned to 434th FS CO Lt Col James Herren, approaches the runway at Wattisham with its gear extended and flaps down. Herren destroyed an He 111 and a Ju 52/3m on the ground at Nancy/Essey on 18 August and shot down three Bf 109s on 26 September, all whilst flying the Lightning (via Cook)

likely that Jeffrey's assessment of the enemy pilot as inexperienced was accurate. Although he had just over two months' combat experience himself, Jeffrey was rated as an exceptional pilot, as confirmed by his ability to follow the rocket fighter in wild manoeuvres while flying a P-38J-15. It is also likely that the German pilot was under orders not to engage the enemy, but simply wanted to take the opportunity to acquaint himself with the B-17 bomber that he would soon be encountering in combat.

Whatever the truth of the matter, Capt Arthur Jeffrey is credited with the first German jet shot down by an Allied pilot during World War 2. He displayed remarkable valour in the best tradition of the USAAF, and earned an unusual distinction for the 479th FG. There is no doubt that he aggressively engaged the first jet in aerial combat, and that he emerged as the victor.

For the rest of July the 479th flew a series of relatively routine missions, with Col Sidney Woods leading the last operation of the month on the 31st – an escort for 2nd Bomb Division (BD) B-24s sent to attack Ludwigshafen. August brought more escort sorties, with the group providing withdrawal cover for Liberators attacking targets south of Paris on the 1st. In a break from the norm, during a strafing mission on 3 August Lts Thomas Myers and Gerald Mulvaney of the 436th FS shared an unusual ground victory at Ensisheim, as indicated by the latter pilot's combat report;

'I was in "Bison White" Flight, flying No 4, when my element leader called in an aeroplane to our left. He made a pass, and I followed him down. I observed hits by Lt Richardson on the tail. I winged over and started my run on the target. It was a dark brown B-24 with straw on the wings and a camouflage curtain covering part of the tail. I shot at the engines and observed a fire on the left wing. I pulled up and looked back.



Mystery machine No 3. This P-38 has been identified as a 435th FS aircraft, although no 'Capt Stephenson' or a Lightning named *Nuey V* is listed on 479th FG rosters, or indeed any other ETO P-38 unit for that matter! (Tabatt collection)

The aeroplane was on fire. Lt Myers made his pass and it exploded. I claim one half B-24 destroyed, with Lt Myers claiming the other share.'

Several other group pilots attacked the captured bomber, but only Mulvaney and Myers received credit for this ground kill. The B-24 had apparently been re-painted in German colours after its capture, and was possibly being used to train Luftwaffe fighter pilots in interception techniques or to fly clandestine missions with KG 100.

Two days later, the group encountered the Jagdwaffe once again during an escort mission to the Krupp munitions facilities at Magdeburg. Following a series of engagements near Hamburg and Stendal, pilots from the 435th and 436th FSs were credited with the destruction of four Bf 109s. Capt Ray Carter and Lt George Sykes got one apiece for the 435th while Capt Clifford Moore and Lt Melvin Mickey added two more for the 436th. Sykes also claimed to have damaged a Bf 109, which escaped through some deft manoeuvring according to his report;

'As I pulled up from the Me 109 I claim as destroyed, I saw another one off to my left. He went into a tight turn to the left just above the trees, with me behind him. I closed to almost 300 yards and fired at about 40 degrees deflection, observing a few hits on the wings and the fuselage of the enemy aircraft. The Me 109 then flew through the smoke of an aircraft burning on the ground. Believing he would keep turning to the left, I kept turning that way too, but when I had passed through the smoke I could not see

An unidentified armourer holds up a belt of 20 mm cannon shells for the benefit of the photographer during a sunny summer's day at Wattisham in 1944. Note the 0.50-cal rounds in their ammunition boxes ready to be slotted into the fighter's nose magazine. The Lightning's closely grouped weaponry gave the fighter a formidable punch that was both feared and respected by the Jagdwaffe. The circular opening at the tip of the nose cone reveals the location of the gun camera (Joe Diaz)



him. My second element flying top cover for me had seen him turn to the right after he had passed through the smoke. They immediately gave chase, but soon broke off the attack to rejoin the flight.'

It was the 434th FS's turn to add to the 479th FG's growing tally of destroyed enemy aircraft on 9 August when it strafed the airfield at Nuneberg. Six Luftwaffe bombers were destroyed and several more damaged. The following day, the group lost its CO, Lt Col Kyle L Riddle (in P-38J 44-23171), during yet another strafing mission. Leading 'White' Flight of the 436th FS in an attack on the Meaux marshalling yards in western France, Riddle's Lightning was hit by flak over the target. Having successfully force-landed his fighter, Riddle began several weeks of evasion with the Resistance before returning to Wattisham in late September.

Lt John Hedenburg was leading the second element of 'Bison White' Flight, and he filed a Missing Aircrew Report (MACR) in which he wrote: 'Somewhere a short distance north of Meaux, "Newcross" called "Highway" (the 479th's call sign, used in this instance by Riddle) and asked permission to go down and get a train. We were at 18,000 ft on the way in. Lt Col Riddle gave his permission, and said we would follow down and cover "Newcross". The latter got the train, and by this time both "Bison" and "Newcross" were pretty well on the deck. "Highway" then called and said, "Let's start our strafing run from here". We turned south a short distance, then "Highway" asked someone to follow him and strafe his tanks when he dropped them. At the same time he turned towards the town of Meaux.



The activity of the 479th FG is chronicled in this photograph of the 434th FS's Operations board, seen here in early August 1944. Lt Col Riddle is still listed as group CO – he was downed by flak on 10 August. Briefing time is listed as an unsocial 0430 hrs (Tabatt collection)

'I positioned my element about 400 yards in trail and Riddle started shooting at a large number of goods wagons in the marshalling yards there. Almost instantly his left wing burst into flames. Apparently, his left engine was hit, for his left wing dropped and he swerved dangerously. I instantly broke hard to the right to go around the town, but I saw him disappear over the top of a hill with his wing still smoking, before my view was cut off. I then curved around to the left behind the town, pulling up 2000-3000 ft. Just beyond the town was a badly damaged P-38 burning in a field. I could see no movement or activity around it and continued with the mission.'

Lt James Frolking was Riddle's wingman, and he had an even closer view of the colonel's plight, as noted in his MACR report;

'We hit the deck about two miles south of the marshalling yards. We came in over a hill on the deck right into the yards. I was in line abreast, with Lt Col Riddle on the left. I opened fire on two goods wagons just as they opened fire on us with heavy flak and light 20 mm flak. Just as I dropped my tanks, I looked over at Lt Col Riddle and he was up on his left wing with his left wing tank on fire. He was turning into me, so I pulled up to miss him. At that time I called him on the radio by his call sign and asked if he was all right. He did not answer. About a minute later I called him again by name and he said he was all right. I lost track of him when I pulled up to miss him. I guess he went right under me. I climbed to about 6000 ft and looked back at the town and yards and saw a crashed aeroplane in a field about a mile or two northwest of the town.'

Riddle was able to belly-land his burning P-38 into a field and struggle out with painful bruises and facial burns. He saw a Frenchman at the edge of the field who motioned to him to lie down until the area was clear of patrolling German troops. Members of the Resistance collected him and tended his wounds while he began the arduous evasion process. 434th FS pilot Lt James Fleming (in P-38J 43-28341) was also lost to flak during this mission, being killed when his fighter crashed near Romery. The group had lost nine pilots killed or captured to flak in the past three weeks.

With Lt Col Riddle on the run in France, the 479th would get a new CO, who would usher in a period of outstanding success for the group.

DISTINGUISHED UNIT CITATION

The operations for which the 479th FG received its Distinguished Unit Citation (DUC) were strafing attacks made between 18 August and 5 September 1944, as well as involvement in a major air battle on 26 September. The group not only made history during this period, but it also came into its own as an effective fighting organisation.

The major driving force behind this success arrived at Wattisham on 12 August in the form of new group commander Col Hubert 'Hub' Zemke. A triple ace with 15 confirmed aerial victories to his credit, Zemke was already famous throughout the USAAF following his successful leadership of the 56th FG. Equipped with the P-47 Thunderbolt, the unit had become known as 'Zemke's Wolfpack', and it would emerge from the war as the top-scoring VIII Fighter Command group.

The same day that Zemke took command of the 479th, the group flew a bomber support mission that saw it divided into four sections which then attacked a series of targets in and around Compiègne, in France. Amongst the pilots involved in this mission was element leader Lt George Hendrix of the 434th FS, who spotted a Ju 88 flying at low altitude near Compiègne at 0745 hrs. He closed on the German bomber and fired from 400 yards, closing to about 20 yards before he saw large pieces fly off its tail and fuselage. The enemy aircraft crashed into a power line and exploded.

Lt James M Hollingsworth, an unusually modest fighter pilot who occasionally neglected to submit reports of his successes, was flying close by, and he confirmed the kill for Hendrix:

'I was flying "Newcross Blue One" on a bomber support mission. Near Compiègne I saw Lt Hendrix attacking a Ju 88 at an altitude of about 100 ft. Observed the Ju 88 in a dive, heading for a high-tension line. He fired a short burst into it. It crashed and exploded. I concur that Lt Hendrix destroyed one Ju 88 in the air.'

Lt George Hendrix poses in front of P-38J *Tarzana*, which he named after his home town in California. Hendrix served with the 434th from January to December 1944, and in that time he was credited with one aerial and two strafing victories (Tabatt collection)



This blurred image, shot by the gun camera in Capt James Hollingsworth's P-38J, was taken during his audacious attack on a flak tower north of Paris on 12 August 1944 (via Hollingsworth)



Back at Wattisham, Col Zemke quickly made a positive impression on his new pilots, including Capt Robin Olds. Indeed, the future ace would later say that the three most agreeable elements of his combat tour were London, the P-51 Mustang and 'Hub' Zemke. The latter pilot's firm leadership, according to Olds, was tempered by a comradely understanding of aggressiveness in combat. The 479th's most successful period can indeed be fairly attributed to the new commander's flexibility towards some aspects of his pilots' eagerness.

Olds would take advantage of his new commander's encouragement to seek out and destroy the enemy whenever possible, starting on 14 August during a fighter-bomber sweep southeast of Paris. The mission was successful, netting two locomotives and 70 goods wagons either destroyed or damaged, four bridges destroyed and another damaged, and four marshalling yards attacked and other railway stations and junctions damaged. A canal lock was also destroyed and six trucks and a barrage balloon were either destroyed or damaged.

Lt George Gleason was flying as 'Newcross Red Four' when he released his bombs on a marshalling yard near Montmirail and noticed Olds flying away from the flight. Gleason made this report the day after the action;

'As I came out of my dive, I saw Capt Robin Olds, "Red Two", heading away from us at about "three o'clock" (directly to Gleason's left) on the deck. I climbed to 6000 ft on a heading of 320 degrees, and a few moments later I heard Capt Olds call over the radio "I've got two '190s", or words to that effect. I called, asking his altitude and position, but got no answer. The radiation fog was so bad I couldn't find him immediately. Then I heard Capt Olds again, stating "I got one". Just then, about two or three miles off to my right, I observed an explosion on the ground and flames that continued too long for a bomb burst.

'I went into a shallow dive, heading in that direction, when Capt Olds called, "I have an announcement to make. I just got the other one, making two for today". At "12 o'clock", approximately a mile ahead of me, I then observed an aircraft dive into a field at the edge of a wood and explode. I confirm Capt Robin Olds' claim of two Fw 190s destroyed.'

The 436th FS suffered one loss, however, when Lt Thomas O'Holleran (in P-38J 43-28432) was shot down by flak and taken prisoner.

Shortly after returning from this mission, Olds was called into Col Zemke's office, along with several other pilots, to be disciplined for breaking formation over the target area. The one thing that Olds feared was that he would be expelled from the group and sent back home with his combat tour curtailed. However, Zemke issued a stern warning to his pilots about the penalties for stepping out of line, fined each man a certain amount of money and commended them for their initiative. Olds became a firm follower of Col Hubert Zemke after that.

More success came the group's way the next day, when the 434th FS escorted aircraft from the 2nd BD sent to attack targets in Holland and western Germany. After covering the 'heavies', Capt Art Jeffrey led the unit in strafing runs over Steenwijk airfield. Aggressive attacks resulted in claims for three Bf 109s destroyed in the air and four more Messerschmitt fighters on the ground. Jeffrey's report records his third confirmed victory;

'I was flying "Newcross Leader" with "White" Flight on a bomber escort when I heard 2Lt George W Gleason from "Blue" Flight call out three enemy aircraft landing at Steenwijk aerodrome. I made a 180-degree turn and went back over the field, circling to the left and losing altitude, descending from 20,000 ft down to 12,000 ft. As I circled, I could hear "Blue" Flight in a scrap. When I was just south of the field, I saw a dirty grey single-engined aircraft at 200-500 ft, flying east to west, right over the field at an estimated speed of 250 mph. I made a 180-degree turn to head west and dived onto him. "Red" Flight was to remain at 10,000 ft as top cover. The enemy aircraft made a 180-degree turn, heading back east at 200-250 ft. That put him right under me.

'By this time I had positively identified the aircraft as an Me 109, so I split-essed from 6000 ft down on him. The enemy aircraft made a sharp turn to the left, and since I was going so fast I overshot him.

'While I was pulling to the left after him, anti-aircraft fire from the aerodrome hit my left wing, knocking out the aeroplane's pitot tube. The enemy aircraft then turned back over the runway, as though to lead me back over the flak from the field. I made a 90-degree turn to the left and a 180-degree turn to the right to keep away from the field. As I rolled out I noticed Lt William H Rogers, "Blue Four", attempting to make a pass on the Me 109, but his speed was also too great and he overshot.

'The Me 109 then headed back across the field from north to south, and I made a 90-degree pass on him in a regular gunnery pattern. I opened fire at 60 degrees, range 350 to 450 yards, and closed to 90 degrees, range 75 to 100 yards. I opened fire with one long five-second burst and observed many strikes all over the enemy aircraft. I also saw many pieces fly off. During this time we were at an altitude of about 200 ft. The German pilot then zoomed up to 300 ft, jettisoned his canopy and parachuted out. The aircraft crashed into the ground almost beneath me and exploded.'

In addition to Jeffrey's confirmed victory, Lt John Hansen and Quentin Pavlock also shot down a Bf 109 each. Hansen claimed two Messerschmitts on the ground as well, while George Hendrix and Calvin Murphy added one each. Capt Hiram Walker (in P-38J 43-28376) and Lt James Wallace (in P-38J 44-23169) were claimed by flak, with Walker subsequently being reported as having been captured – Wallace had been killed, however.

The 479th FG history had a final exultant entry about the action;

Lt James Wallace of the 434th FS was listed as killed in action on 15 August 1944 when P-38J 44-23169 *SLEEPY TIME GAL* failed to return from a B-24 escort mission which was followed by a successful strafing attack on grounded aircraft. The *Lightning* was hit by flak over Uffelte and crashed moments later. Wallace had been with the 479th FG since January 1944 (Tabatt collection)



'One flak battery and four gunners were placed permanently in Adolf's list of "has beens", and a trainer aircraft was shot up somewhat, adding to the damaged aeroplane list.'

GROUND ATTACK SUCCESS

On 18 August, the 479th escorted 70 B-24s from the 2nd BD to Nancy/Essey airfield, on the Franco-German border. Once the heavy bombers had cleared the target area, Col Zemke led his 50 P-38s down in wave after wave to strafe the still stunned airfield. More than 40 German fighters and bombers were destroyed, this tally putting the group well on the way to winning its DUC. Zemke summed up the action in his report;

'Group leader and seven pilots of "Lakeside" (435th call sign) started dive-strafing for two or three runs as soon as the dust cleared, to be followed by low-level strafing by everyone. When very little flak was found, four to seven passes were made.'

About 70 aircraft were observed on the ground, although the attacks were carried out so vigorously that the P-38 pilots claimed to have hit more than 100! When the final gun camera films and post-action reports were reviewed, claims of between 38 and 43 aircraft destroyed and 28 damaged were awarded for the loss of the 434th's Lt Philip Manning (in P-38J 42-67296). Hit by flak over the airfield, he was killed when his fighter crashed near the town of Nancy. The heavy bombers were also credited with the destruction of four German aircraft on the airfield.

Lt George Gleason of the 434th claimed four destroyed (revised to one Fw 190, two shared He 111s and half a Ju 88) and one (Fw 190) damaged. His combat report is terse, but descriptive;

'I was flying "Newcross White Four" on a bomber escort mission at 1640 hrs. "Newcross White" Flight saw enemy aircraft on Nancy-Essey aerodrome and was called down to strafe them by Col Zemke, so we peeled off from 10,000 ft and made seven or eight passes on the aerodrome, going from east to west. I fired at the Fw 190 first and saw it explode and burn. The second and third passes were on two Ju 88s, and they both exploded and started to burn. The fourth and fifth passes were concentrated on one He 111, and it finally exploded and started to burn.

The next two passes were concentrated on an Fw 190 and a Ju 88, and I observed strikes on both of them but they didn't catch fire.'

Capt Robin Olds was leading 'Newcross Blue' Flight, and he went into the fray with his usual enthusiasm;

'A "Lakeside" flight cut across in front of me while I was observing the fight, and upon looking up I followed this flight instead of my squadron. We dive-strafed the field on the first pass, observing very little flak. On this first pass I set an He 111 on fire. Circling left, we came back for another pass. By this time there were several ships burning in the main portion of the field. All of my passes were from the northeast to the southwest, and they cut across Nancy on recovery. The pattern continued left. My wingman (Lt Philip W Manning) went in on his second pass.

'While positioning myself for a third pass, I noticed another box of bombers on a run. I called them in, and all ships strafing drew off until the bombing had been completed. We then took up our strafing again. I picked out two ships – Ju 88s parked close together in front of the hangars on the northeast side of the field. I made two passes at these two ships, and by the third pass they were both burning. I continued across the field and concentrated on another Ju 88 on the far side. I made two more passes on this ship and then ran out of ammunition.

'I pulled up and circled at 8000 ft, trying to count the burning aircraft. I counted 30, but could not get the exact number due to smoke. I claim four destroyed on the ground – one He 111, two Ju 88s and one Ju 88 shared.'

Olds' claims were later revised to three destroyed, but he was still the first 479th pilot to achieve five confirmed air and ground claims.

These 479th FG pilots posing for a publicity photograph at Wattisham claimed 18 aircraft destroyed between them at Nancy/Essey airfield on 18 August 1944. This was the first day of the official period for which the group received its DUC (Tabatt collection)



Lt Harry Little was flying as "Newcross" Spare, and he followed "Blue" Flight down to join the attack from north to south. He may have targeted the same group of aircraft engaged by Olds, as he reported;

'I strafed an He 111 which did not burn. My second pass was east to west on an He 111. On the third pass I started this one burning. On the fourth I started a Ju 88 burning. My eighth, and last, pass was made on the first He 111 I had strafed, but it still did not burn. All passes were east to west except the first. I claim one Ju 88 and one He 111 destroyed and four He 111s damaged, all on the ground.'

Lt Tom Olson was flying the tail position in 'White' Flight when he followed his squadronmates down to join the battle;

'When we went down, I made three passes from northeast to southwest along the southern edge of the field. On my first pass I strafed four aircraft. The first was close to the hangar on the northeastern edge of the field. Two were close together near the centre of the field, and the fourth was to the extreme southwest edge of the field. These burst into flames. My next pass was slightly to the left of my first, and I fired on three aircraft. The first was quite close to the hangars – this one caught fire and burned. The second and third ones were quite close to the second and third aircraft of my first pass. One of these caught fire too.

'On my third pass I strafed two aircraft. Although several hits were seen, and the landing gear collapsed on one, they did not catch fire. On pulling out of this pass, I noticed three Ju 88s and one He 111. I made two passes, concentrating mainly on one Ju 88 just outside the woods, noticing several hits and one landing gear collapse. On pulling out of my second pass here, I noticed another He 111 on the other side of the woods. I made one pass, noticing several direct hits and, on pulling out to make another pass, it exploded. I then made one pass from north to south, inflicting damage to one aircraft.'

Olson was credited with destroying an He 111, a Ju 88, a Bf 109 and an Fw 190, which he shared with Lt Ted Sowerby of the 435th FS, plus an He 111 shared with Lt Nelson Butler, also of the 435th. Lt Howard Smith of the 435th was credited with destroying four He 111s to share the day's high-score honours with Olson.

Lt Ray Friend of the 435th carried out some wild shooting at everything in sight on his first pass from east to west. He wrote later;

'On my next pass I came in the same way, concentrating on one aeroplane, and I clobbered it good. Then I shot at a couple more on the way across. As I pulled up, I could see the aeroplane burning that I had concentrated on. Again, I only damaged the others. On my next pass I hit another one, and stayed on it until it was really burning good. On my last strafing run there was too much smoke over the airfield, and I couldn't find a target to shoot at. Boy, what hunting! I claim two He 111s destroyed and three He 111s damaged.'

Friend was finally credited with sharing in the destruction of a Ju 88 with Capt Claire Duffie of the 434th, as well as damaging three He 111s.

The confused circumstances of the action over Nancy/Essey on 18 August prevented the combat claims from this mission being confirmed for a further nine days. By then, all claims had been compared with gun-camera film and strike photography to verify the results. Over-claiming often arose after extended strafing attacks such as this one, and the action of the 18th was particularly confusing, in spite of the group's observation

of disciplined traffic patterns throughout the strafing runs on Nancy/Essey airfield. Fortunately for the pilots involved in this action, there was little in the way of concentrated flak, or the added hazard of crossing traffic in the rising smoke. This kept the 479th's casualty rate down to just one – Lt Philip Manning of the 434th.

Credits were at last awarded to pilots of the 434th and 435th FSs, although even then they were subject to revision. The successful pilots from the 434th FS were as follows – Lt Col J M Herren, one Ju 52/3m and one He 111 destroyed; Capt R Olds, one He 111 and two Ju 88s destroyed; Capt C A P Duffie, one Ju 88 destroyed and one Ju 88 shared destroyed with Lt R K Friend (of the 435th FS); Lt H C Little, one Ju 88 destroyed and one Ju 88 shared destroyed with Capt G K Sykes (of the 435th FS); Lt W M Drake, one Fw 190 and two Ju 88s destroyed; Lt C J Murphy, one Fw 190 destroyed; Lt C L Peterson, one Ju 52/3m destroyed; Lt G W Gleason, one Fw 190 destroyed, two He 111s shared destroyed with Lt C F Monsell (of the 435th FS) and one Ju 88 shared destroyed with Lt H W Detlefson; Lt T C Olson, one Fw 190 shared destroyed with Lt T J Sowerby (of the 435th FS), one He 111 shared with Lt N W Butler (of the 435th FS) and one Ju 88, one Bf 109 and one He 111 destroyed; Lt R H Hendrickson, two Ju 88s destroyed; Lt H F Grenning, one He 111 and one Ju 88 destroyed; and Lt J W Hansen, one He 111 and one Ju 88 destroyed.

The successful pilots from the 435th FS were as follows – Capt G K Sykes, one He 111 destroyed and one He 111 shared with Lt Little; Lt P D Gossard, one He 111 destroyed; Lt V E Hooker, one He 111 shared destroyed with Lt Monsell and one He 111 shared destroyed with Lt Butler; Lt C W Granville, one He 111 and one Ju 88 destroyed; Lt D L Naule, one He 111 destroyed; Lt R N Pigg, one He 111 and one Ju 88 destroyed; Lt Monsell, two He 111s shared with Lt Gleason, one He 111 shared with Lt Hooker; Lt Butler, one He 111 shared destroyed with Lt Hooker and one He 111 shared destroyed with Lt Olson; Lt Friend, one Ju 88 shared destroyed with Capt Duffie; Lt Sowerby, one Fw 190 shared destroyed with Lt Olson and one Ju 88 destroyed; Lt Detlefson, one Ju 88 shared with Lt Gleason; and Lt H C Smith, four He 111s destroyed.

When combined, these kills amounted to the most extensive claim made to date by an VIII Fighter Command group for German aircraft destroyed on the ground. Intelligence officers had worked very hard to untangle the various claims made by the 479th FG and the 2nd BD. Their commitment to the task at hand is revealed in the following extract from a letter dated 30 August 1944 from the Intelligence sections of the 434th and 435th FSs to the group CO;

'Photo Interpretation Report No K-3041 shows 51 aircraft on the field proper, 31 of which were destroyed by fire, seven damaged by high explosive machine gun fire and 13 intact. However, on annotated photograph 3089, 34 aircraft are shown destroyed by fighters, four destroyed by bombers and one destroyed by the combined action of fighters and bombers. Two aircraft appear destroyed by fire and are claimed, making a total of 37 enemy aircraft destroyed by fighter action on the field proper. In addition, six aircraft were destroyed off the aerodrome proper in areas not included in Photo-Reconnaissance Unit coverage.'



435th FS pilot Lt Verne Hooker, photographed here later in the war, shared the credit for destroying two He 111s caught on the ground during the strafing attack on Nancy/Essey airfield on 18 August 1944 (Tabatt collection)

Even though the 18 August operation was the most successful attack against Luftwaffe aircraft yet conducted by the group, it represented just the start of a period in which the unit excelled in combat. Although the 479th's DUC would specify actions on 18 August, 5 September and 26 September 1944, several other missions flown during this period would also produce successes.

Weather restricted operations between 19 and 24 August, and on the latter date the 479th escorted B-24s making a raid deep into Germany. Several bombers were lost to flak, but few Luftwaffe fighters appeared, as was typical at this stage of the war. There was a different story to report the following day, however, as the group's history explains;

'With the B-24s scheduled to blow hell out of the bomber parts manufacturing centre and assembly plants at Wismar, the 479th took to the air at 0923 hrs, with 40 P-38s airborne for the purpose of furnishing escort for the entire trip. The "big friends" were sort of strung out, but the meeting was finally arranged in the area of Gustrow at 1212 hrs. The bombing of the target was good, with tremendous fires and smoke issuing from the clobbered area.

'The 434th FS, numbering a mere 16 aeroplanes, took on a bunch of Me 109s, numbering over 40, between Plau and Rostock. They ended the fight with claims of five destroyed, two probably destroyed and one damaged. Capt Robin Olds led the day with three destroyed, followed by Capt C A P Duffie, two destroyed, Lt B E Hollister, two destroyed, and Lt Walter B Drake, one damaged.'

Capt Olds was leading 'Yellow' Flight near Rostock when 'Newcross Yellow Four' called out bogies dead ahead and slightly below. Olds immediately put on power and manoeuvred to get behind the unidentified aircraft, which were little more than dark shapes at this early stage in the interception. When he closed to within a mile of them, they became identifiable as Bf 109s. Ordering his flight to drop tanks, Olds started the pursuit.

In the final turn to get behind the German fighters, Olds was overtaken by his Nos 3 and 4. The rest of the 434th FS, as well as the remaining P-38s from the 479th FG, were hopelessly out of place to repel the attackers, so it was up to Olds to relate his position and heading to the group while attempting to draw up behind the enemy formation. When he was finally astern of the German fighters, Olds picked out a Messerschmitt on the right-hand side of the formation and held his fire until he was about 250 yards behind it. Hits were immediately registered, and the German pilot took to his parachute. Olds then broke violently to the left and flew over the enemy formation, making a 360-degree turn that brought him back onto the tails of the Messerschmitts.

Lt Berkley Hollister, who was Olds' No 4, started his pass on a group of five fighters, which Olds covered until he started his own attack. Once again, the latter pilot drew close to a Messerschmitt prior to firing, and for the second time in just a few minutes the *Jagdflieger* took to his parachute.

The fight then became a general melee, with P-38s and Bf 109s chasing each other in the bright sunlight at altitudes descending from about 20,000 ft. Olds rolled over after a Messerschmitt that was on the tail of another American fighter. So violent was his manoeuvre, with indicated speed exceeding 500 mph, that part of his canopy blew off, 'scaring the



Lt Berkley Hollister of the 434th FS had his best scoring day on 25 August 1944 when he claimed to have shot down two Bf 109s over the Rostock area. Capt Robin Olds also got his first triple victory haul during the same mission. Hollister, who scored two strafing victories the following month, is pictured here in late 1944 sat in his P-51D 44-14651. All of Hollister's successes came in the P-38J (Tabatt collection)

hell out of me', as his post-action report put it. But this did not prevent him from sticking to the tail of his prey until the pair straightened out over a wheat field near Rostock. Once again Olds fired from close range until the Bf 109 pilot bailed out.

Capt Duffie was leading the 434th FS on this mission, and he responded to 'Yellow' Flight's calls by ordering 'Red' and 'White' Flights to drop tanks when he visually located the fight. With 'Red' Flight staying at 20,000 ft to provide cover, Duffie dove into the battle and picked out what seemed to be the leading Messerschmitt. Firing steadily as soon as he had closed to about 1000 yards, Duffie saw strikes flashing along the right side of his target, which turned over and crashed.

Duffie was then at about 19,000 ft, and he noticed that he was on the verge of compressibility as he made an overhead pass at the last Bf 109 in the pack. The enemy fighter escaped with a split-ess manoeuvre, even though Duffie stayed on its tail, dropping his combat flaps to ensure that he remained with it. While he chased the Messerschmitt down to the deck, Olds was already there, and about to lose his canopy. He later confirmed Duffie's second kill of the day in this supporting report;

'As I drew closer to the fight, the '109 made a turn to the right, passing down to my right about 1000 ft below me. My airspeed at this time was in the neighbourhood of 500 mph. In spite of the fact that the P-38 was by this time hot on the '109's tail, I rolled over onto my back and pulled through for a 90-degree deflection shot at it. I was way out of range, but let go a burst anyway.

'As I started to roll out, my left window blew out and I lost control of the aeroplane. As I pulled out on the deck, I turned right and started to clear my tail. Just then I saw a '109 hit and explode to my right front. This was the ship that the P-38 had been after. I learned later that Capt Duffie was the pilot of this particular P-38. He and I were the only P-38s down that low, and at that moment that was the only Me 109 that I saw in that particular area.'

When Lt Hollister's two targets were also confirmed as destroyed, the 479th had enjoyed its most successful day of aerial combat in the P-38 to date, with six Bf 109s shot down and a seventh damaged, all for no loss. It

was an especially sweet victory for the 434th FS, since Capt Robin Olds had become the group's first pilot to claim five aircraft confirmed as shot down in aerial combat.

The 479th enjoyed another productive day of combat on the 28th, when P-38s attacked rail centres and airfields in France, Belgium and Holland. The day's first mission, to Sedan/Doury aerodrome, was led by Capt Art Jeffrey. When the 434th FS arrived over the target, a Ju 52/3m transport was spotted taking off, as Jeffrey later reported;

'I called the group to circle while I went down to make a pass, leaving three of the four flights in "Newcross" Squadron to cover us. By this time, the aeroplane was approximately five miles from the field, heading north at about 300 ft. I made my pass from about "seven o'clock" and high to him, opening fire at approximately 800 yards from the target, observing strikes on the fuselage. Then I closed to about 350 yards and gave him another burst. The right engine flamed up immediately and the aeroplane then crashed into the ground. By this time I had identified the enemy aircraft as a Ju 52.'

Capt James Hollingsworth was leading 'Newcross Yellow' Flight when he went down on a strafing run in the same area;

'We passed over the grass field and I made a run from east to west across the southern end of the aerodrome. I fired from approximately 300 yards at a Do 217. It caught fire and exploded. I then pulled up and left that immediate area.'

Lt Tom Olson also accounted for an Fw 190 in the air and damaged another unidentified aircraft on the ground to give the 434th three more kills. The unit was the leading 479th FG squadron at the time with 14 aerial and 30+ strafing kills. The overall group total would rise dramatically during September.

'THE GREATEST DOGFIGHT OF THE WAR'

The second date specifically mentioned on the 479th's DUC was 5 September 1944. In two separate operations flown that day, the group attacked airfields at Ettingshausen, Höchst-Oberau, Bad Nauheim and Marzhausen, and claimed 30+ aircraft destroyed on the ground. Other transportation targets in the general area were also strafed. The 434th FS war diary jubilantly reported;

'On the 5th the squadron had a field day. Col Woods led the morning "Rhubarb" and found Jerries sitting on Ettingshausen aerodrome. A traffic pattern was set up, resulting in 20 assorted Jerries destroyed. In the afternoon, Capt Duffie took the unit back there to finish off what few enemy aircraft were left untouched from the morning attack. This time eight were accounted for, making a total of 28 for the day. Not bad!'

The 434th took the lion's share of the confirmed claims, while the 436th added eight more to the group score. Lt Hans Grasshoff of the 436th claimed four Fw 190s destroyed and a fifth damaged during the attack on Bad Nauheim aerodrome to record the unit's top score of the day. Squadronmate Lt Edwin Lewin claimed two Fw 190s and an Fi 156 destroyed, and Lt Gerald Mulvaney was also credited with the destruction of two Focke-Wulfs.

The latter pilot's combat tour had nearly been curtailed several months earlier by an unwise challenge to the 434th FS's Capt Art Jeffrey.



These two views, taken on 26 August 1944, show the P-38J of 436th FS pilot Lt Hans Grasshoff after it had come to grief off the end of the Wattisham runway. Obviously undeterred by his little excursion 'into the weeds', Grasshoff would claim the destruction of four Fw 190s on the ground during the 5 September strafing raid on Bad Nauheim airfield. He would also down a Bf 109 whilst flying a Lightning on 26 September, followed by an Fw 190 on 27 November – by then he had converted onto the P-51D (Tabatt collection)



Mulvaney had brazenly suggested that his skill was equal to that of any other aviator in the group, and the pragmatic Jeffrey had quietly suggested to the brash young pilot that he should try to follow his manoeuvres as they flew in formation.

It was a contest that Mulvaney could not win. If Jeffrey shook the young pilot off his tail, then Mulvaney would be classified as a chastened hot pilot, yet if he managed to best the more experienced aviator then he would be considered too dangerous to fly in formation with. In the end, Mulvaney managed to stay with Jeffrey, but not so expertly as to create indignation. Afterwards, Jeffrey avoided the younger pilot, who would ultimately complete 61 missions with the 436th FS.

On 5 September Mulvaney was flying 'Bison Red Two', and he made five or six passes on Bad Nauheim aerodrome. He subsequently reported;

'On the first pass we were making a flak check, commencing our run from approximately 4000 ft. I started shooting from this altitude at several aeroplanes parked near the centre of the field. Observing no flak, I pulled up and made a left-hand traffic pattern turn. I went in again, getting a good sight on one Fw 190 parked in the group near the centre of the field. I saw it burst into flames and burn. On the next pass I observed strikes on

another Fw 190 parked nearby, but it did not burn. On the fourth pass I saw strikes on a further Fw 190, and it too burst into flames as I pulled up. The fifth, and last, pass was made strafing various aeroplanes dispersed on the field, but without observed results.'

The 434th FS had no fewer than seven pilots making multiple claims, including Lt John Murr with three Bf 110s destroyed, Lt Tom Neely with two Bf 110s and a Ju 88 destroyed and Lt Tom Olson with three Do 217s destroyed (taking his overall tally to eight strafing victories).

Lt Col Sid Woods, who destroyed a Ju 88 at Ettingshausen, noted in his subsequent report;

'We set up two separate traffic patterns – "Yellow" and "Blue" Flights strafed the southern end of the field from east to west in a left-hand pattern, while "White" and "Red" Flights strafed the northern end from east to west in a right-hand pattern. We made a total of eight to ten passes, then climbed and orbited the field at 8000 ft. I counted 19 aeroplanes burning, but smoke was so thick that it obscured sections of the field and prohibited a completely accurate count.'

Two of the confirmed Ettingshausen airfield claims were granted to Capt James Hollingsworth, who was credited with a pair of Do 217s destroyed during the first attack on the base. His habitual modesty, however, could not hide the success he achieved during a subsequent attack on the same airfield later that day when he set a VIII Fighter Command record for P-38 pilots.

The morning attacks had been so successful that the group's squadrons succeeded in getting permission to fly a follow-up strike later that same

Lt John Murr (second from left) of the 434th FS claimed to have destroyed three Bf 110s on the ground on 5 September during a raid on Ettingshausen aerodrome. He was also credited with shooting down a Bf 109 on 26 September, and on Christmas Day 1944, while flying a P-51D, Murr despatched an Fw 190 to complete a record of five German aircraft claimed in the air or on the ground. He is seen here with his groundcrew and a decidedly uncharacteristic P-38J that displays an early camouflage scheme and few visible unit or personal markings (Tom Hollingsworth)



day. Accordingly, the eager pilots were airborne by late afternoon, Capt Duffie leading 34 P-38s to Ettingshausen. Capt Hollingsworth made six passes on the aerodrome and claimed four Me 410 twin-engined fighters destroyed. His tally of six strafing kills in a day remained unequalled by any other P-38 pilot in VIII Fighter Command through to war's end.

Hollingsworth's squadronmate Lt John Morrow also enjoyed success during his strafing passes that evening:

'I was flying "Newcross Yellow Four" on a strafing mission in the Giessen area. We observed two aircraft parked on a grass field south of the town and made a dive-strafing pass from northwest to southeast. I observed an Me 109 parked in an opening of a wooded section at the southeastern end of the field, but couldn't get my sights on it. The flight climbed back up and made another run, and this time I got the '109, opening fire from about 400 yards. I observed many strikes along the wing roots and fuselage, and the aircraft burst into flames just as I passed over it.'

Capt Claire Duffie confirmed Morrow's claim, reporting:

'I was leading the group, flying with "Newcross" Squadron. "Newcross White" Flight provided top cover for all the strafing activity in the Giessen area. As I left the area I observed flames and smoke from a burning aircraft on a small field south of Giessen in the vicinity of Grossenlinden. "Newcross Yellow" Flight had strafed this field. I confirm 2Lt John W Morrow's claim of one Me 109 destroyed on the ground.'

Lt Tom Olson also claimed a Bf 110 and yet another Do 217 to raise his own tally for the day to five.

The 479th had taken high honours for aircraft destroyed on the ground, even though the rest of VIII Fighter Command would soon take up the



Capt James Hollingsworth of the 434th FS set a record for an ETO P-38 pilot when he claimed the destruction of two German aircraft on the ground at Ettingshausen during the morning mission of 5 September 1944, followed by a further four at the same location during a follow-up sweep that afternoon. He is pictured here later in the war (via Hollingsworth)

Lt John Morrow's groundcrew pose beside by his 434th FS P-38J SHOO-SHOO BABY. It was while flying this aircraft that Morrow claimed to have destroyed a Bf 109 on the ground at Ettingshausen on 5 September 1944 and a second Messerschmitt fighter in the air southwest of Munster some 19 days later (Tabatt via Molesworth)

Although blurred, this image was sufficiently detailed enough for Capt Hollingsworth to receive confirmation for the destruction of a Do 217 at Ettingshausen on 5 September – one of two Dornier bombers and four Me 410s that he destroyed on this date (via Hollingsworth)



challenge to inflict further punishment on the faltering Luftwaffe. It was a curious feature of this stage of the post-invasion period that more German aircraft were destroyed in low-level strafing attacks on airfields than were shot down by fighter escorts defending heavy bombers. Priorities had shifted for the Jagdwaffe due to the more efficient and aggressive escort tactics that had been introduced by the USAAF in the spring of 1944, and because of a pressing need to counter tactical Allied air attacks on retreating German forces during August and September.

Whilst the Wehrmacht was finding it difficult to regroup and reform its defensive lines due to constant air attacks upon its retreating troops, the Luftwaffe was facing continual demands to protect lines of communication on the ground. Allied air attacks were destroying rail, river and air transport targets, while retreating fighter and bomber units were being crowded onto improvised staging airfields, where they presented tempting targets for marauding USAAF fighter-bombers. This situation had arisen following the successful Allied breakout from Normandy in July 1944, and the usually efficient German war machine remained in a disorganised flight that would not be halted until late September.

The Luftwaffe was also experiencing a severe shortage of experienced fighter crews. The great air battles of April 1944 had accelerated the drain of veteran pilots, and their numbers continued to be attrited for the rest of the war. Starting with the Jagdwaffe's response to the Normandy invasion, there was a growing practice of committing novice pilots to the battle, led by a handful of battle-hardened veterans.

By September, Luftwaffe fighter units were better established at airfields in southern and western Germany, and VIII Fighter Command once again began to encounter more opposition during its bomber escort missions. This in turn meant an increased opportunity for Allied pilots to claim aerial successes. Amongst those units in the vanguard of the fight was the 479th FG.

CONVERSION TO THE P-51

For the 479th, this period coincided with its switch in equipment from the P-38 Lightning to the P-51 Mustang. The group's more experienced pilots were proud of their P-38s, and viewed the conversion onto the new type with some anxiety – had they not proven their mettle with the

Lt Robert B Kline was among the first group of 479th FG Mustang pilots when he joined the 434th FS in September 1944. He was initially assigned P-51D 44-14395, which was later replaced by P-51K 44-11764. Both were christened *The ONLEY Genevieve*. Kline completed his tour with three strafing kills to his name (via Blake)



Lightning since arriving in the ETO? There were also some new pilots to welcome, and the 434th FS history summed up the general attitude to the change;

'A likely-looking bunch of replacements reported for duty on 7 September. Included in the group are 2Lts Philip A Brown, Clarence G Haynes, Edward L Hurtig, Harold M Jenkins Jr, Robert B Kline, Wendell H Marlowe and Jerome K Nagel. All are single-engined men, and they should fit in very nicely with our change over to P-51s.

'It was with some apprehension that the squadron viewed the first lot of P-51s to be assigned to us on the 8th. They are supposed to be the hottest thing in the ETO, but seeing as how we are confirmed "Pee-dash-three-eight" men, we will have to be convinced. Sgt Hayner, the painter (Best in the West), got busy on the "Spam Cans", putting on the battle markings as soon as Engineering finished the acceptance checks. As fast as the P-51s are passed by Engineering, pilots assemble to get some time in them before going operational. The newer men are quite impressed that it is necessary to queue up to get a ship to fly in this squadron. "Eager" is hardly the word for it, however!'

Eagerness did not completely compensate for inexperience, for although it was one of the most tractable high-performance aircraft of World War 2, the P-51 required due attention to be paid to its flying characteristics before a pilot could claim proficiency with the type. The P-38 had a reputation for being a difficult aircraft to master, and most pilots were thoroughly exhausted after even a short initial flight. The Mustang would soon be tamed by the group's old hands, but the transition took a toll.

The first loss came on 9 September when 435th FS pilot Lt Everett Ford put his P-51 into a dive during a training flight and failed to recover. Two more of the squadron's pilots perished on the 14th when Lts Ivan Ervin and Chester Granville (in P-51D 44-14437) were lost over the Irish Sea during a training flight. The official loss report noted the following details;

'An unidentified aircraft was seen crashing off the coast of Ireland at Carling Ford. Aeroplane and pilot completely destroyed, although identification tags that were found belonged to Lt Ervin, call sign



"Lakeside 74". A teletype was sent to the 479th FG confirming his death, and also disposal of the body. This was done by an American who handles all air-sea rescue work in Ireland.

'Obtaining course and route of the returning flight, we were able to tell just about where the other pilot, "Lakeside 90", went in, if he did. No 15 Group RAF immediately sent a boat out to search. Weather was bad, so it checked all aerodromes in England, and one aircraft was seen leaving the Manchester area. Checking with the leader of the "Lakeside" Flight, he advised that if an aircraft was seen leaving the area of Manchester, it would most likely have been "Lakeside 90". Search was conducted for the following three days, but with nil results. Owing to the lack of concrete information concerning this incident, very little could be accomplished.'

Despite these losses, conversion to the new type progressed quickly enough for the group to introduce the Mustang to operations on 12 September. Col Zemke was delighted to be leading the B-24 escort mission (totalling 20 P-51s) at the head of the 435th FS, which was selected to be the first unit in the group to field the new fighter. Lt Col Riddle, who had recently returned to the 479th after evading capture, led 18 P-38s of the 434th FS, while Capt Clifford Moore headed up 15 Lightnings from the 436th FS on what would turn out to be an uneventful mission.

The ambitious operation to facilitate a rapid thrust into Germany by taking the bridge at Arnhem via a paratroop drop commenced on

These two views of Wattisham were taken during the 479th's transition period in September 1944, when the group's three squadrons exchanged its P-38Js for P-51s. The first shot clearly shows Lightnings parked on the grass dispersal area, while the bottom photograph reveals Mustangs in markings that are difficult to identify (Tabatt collection)

17 September. This was the part of the plan known as Operation *Market Garden*, which also called for a large Allied land force to follow up the drop. However, progress of the latter was stalled by the Wehrmacht, and the lightly armed British paratroops holding the bridge at Arnhem were eventually forced to surrender to German troops.

Like most VIII Fighter Command units, the 479th was tasked with providing air cover for bombers and transports supporting *Market Garden*. Things did not start well for the group, however, as Capt George Sykes (in P-51D 44-14424) of the 435th FS was shot down by flak near the Dutch town of Ede. The group flew a series of uneventful escort missions for the next six days, escorting B-24s dropping supplies for troops in the field. Anti-aircraft emplacements in the Arnhem area were also attacked when the weather permitted such flights to be made.

Having seen no sign of the Luftwaffe in the air since 28 August, pilots from the 479th FG finally encountered German aircraft once again on 26 September. And on this occasion the enemy was up in force, allowing the group to claim a record haul of aerial victories – newspaper accounts inflated the results of the battle to portray the 479th as the most successful US fighter unit in the entire ETO! The final confirmed tally was 28 Bf 109s and one Fw 190 shot down and 11 others either probably shot down or damaged. News reports inflated the total to 32 destroyed, while German records state that no more than 20 Luftwaffe fighters were lost or severely damaged in the battle.

Some 28 P-38s and 12 P-51s had taken off from Wattisham during the early afternoon of 26 September, with Col Zemke leading the formation. The group had been tasked with flying a Microwave Early Warning (MEW) sweep east of Nijmegen and Arnhem. Again, Zemke headed up the 435th FS ('Lakeside'), which had despatched 12 of its new P-51s. His combat report from the mission described how the engagement began;

'At Haltern, I looked over my right wing to check a small grass aerodrome and saw one aircraft flying directly over it on a westerly heading. The group was notified of this bogie, and that I was going down to investigate. The P-51 squadron followed me down in a long steep dive from 13,000 ft to 2000 ft. As we drew closer, more aircraft were picked up around this one, flying in four-ship line abreast. The approach was made to very good firing range directly astern without the enemy aircraft breaking formation. Unfortunately, I was unable to identify them, so I pulled up sharply and rolled over on my back to see their wing crosses.

'By this time, the tail end of the enemy formation had identified us, and they were dropping their external tanks. I too dropped my tanks and slipped down behind this formation so as to get into a firing position. The enemy aircraft were breaking to the right, which meant that we had lost the element of surprise.'

The German force now engaged by the 479th FG was comprised of 14 Bf 109s from III./JG 300 and 40+ aircraft from *Stab* JG 4, I./JG 3 and III./JG 53. Led by Major Hans-Karl Kamp, these fighters had been ordered up from Paderborn at 1630 hrs to patrol the Dortmund area and defend German troops in Eindhoven and Nijmegen. Fifteen minutes later they were jumped by Zemke and the P-51s of the 435th FS, with the 28 P-38s from the group's two remaining squadrons attacking the German aircraft minutes later.

Zemke's report continued;

'I picked out an Me 109 from the centre of the formation and placed the gyro dot of my K-14 sight (new computing type of gunsight fitted to the P-51D) on him – my range was about 500 yards. I had forgotten about the range device on my throttle, and fired two or three bursts of 20-25 rounds without any result. By this time the Me 109 was going around in a circle, with me following. Again, I opened up when he was at an angle of 40 degrees, and the bursts hit him on the top surfaces of the fuselage and wings. The Me 109 was not hit hard, but he flopped over on his back, trying to split-ess, and then bailed out.

'At about this time I mistook my wingman for an Me 109, and several minutes were wasted as I tried to get him off my tail before I recognised him. I believe one short burst without effect was fired at an enemy aircraft, before I picked up a lone Me 109 running for the clouds to the south. He must have been 1000 yards in front of us, so we chased after him as fast as we could. Just before he entered the clouds, I opened up with a long burst, but I only saw two lone hits on the wing before he was enshrouded in the clouds.'

Zemke then noticed a Bf 109 withdrawing from combat, chased by P-38s, and he too dived after the enemy pilot, who was obviously in a panic;

'This fellow was skidding and slipping before I even closed to good range. At about 400 yards, with a deflection of 20-30 degrees, a shot was taken and hits were registered on his fuselage. Immediately, his canopy was seen to come off and he bailed out. Pictures were taken of this aeroplane hitting the ground and exploding.'

Zemke's wingman, 2Lt Billy Means, confirmed that his leader had destroyed two aircraft and damaged one. He also made some revealing observations in his own report about the general state of the air battle;

'There was a grand confusion of P-38s, P-51s and Me 109s milling all over the sky. I was trying to look in all directions at the same time, and having a hell of a time. Almost immediately, however, the colonel picked another Me 109, closed to shorter range than the first (confirmed Bf 109) and gave it two good bursts. The second bunch of strikes were visible just as the aeroplane entered a cloud, trailing black smoke. We broke up over the cloud and chased him back in it on the other side. Eventually, we lost him, however.'

P-51 pilot Lt Nelson Butler, flying as 'Lakeside Red Three', also claimed two Bf 109s destroyed;

'Having initially made a head-on pass at a German fighter, I turned to follow him and got closer to him as he tried to climb away. I continued closing to about 100 yards and fired a good burst, which fairly got him. He was soon engulfed in flames, and finally I saw him spin in.

'I saw another Me 109 flying along on top of about an 8/10ths overcast. I was about 2000 ft above him, so I went to the rear and slightly to the left of him. As I started to close on him, he saw me and went into the overcast. I pulled up and over to the left and waited for him to reappear. He came out and I started after him again, but he saw me once more and went back into the clouds. I pulled up and waited for him again. We came to the edge of the overcast and he broke out again. I was close to him there, so I got on his tail and tried a couple of shots, but he was using evasive action and I missed. He made a sharp turn to the left and went back into the overcast.



Lt Col James M Herren Jr was the popular CO of the 434th FS from January 1944 until he was lost in a possible mid-air collision that occurred within a terrible storm front on 30 October. He was credited with shooting down three Bf 109s while flying his P-38J 42-68008 on 26 September, and then bagged another Messerschmitt fighter in his very first mission at the controls of a P-51D (44-14396) just 48 hours later. The two additional victory markings displayed on the side of his Mustang denote a Ju 52/3m and an He 111 that he destroyed at Nancy/Essey on 18 August 1944 in his P-38 (via Blake)

I was close to him then, so I ducked under him and flew instruments with him for a while. When we broke out again, I raised up behind him and shot him down. When I hit him, he turned over and went straight in. I followed him down and took pictures when he crashed.'

Fellow Mustang pilot Lt Martin Gorian also claimed a Bf 109 destroyed while flying as 'Lakeside White Three';

'I got onto its tail at 8000 ft but did not start firing until I was within 100 yards of it because the sun was blinding and identification of the ship was hard. I immediately opened fire, but was overrunning him, so I started slow rolling right behind him and kept on firing. I saw numerous hits. At 2000 ft the enemy aircraft seemed to be out of control, and it finally split-essed into the ground. I did not see the pilot bail out.'

Gorian's wingman, 2Lt Norman Benoit, saw the enemy fighter hit the ground;

'I observed hits on the Me 109 – this continued for the next 15 seconds. The Me 109 then crashed and exploded.'

Lt William Pickering also claimed two Bf 109s while he was leading 'Lakeside White' Flight. He also confirmed the end of Lt Quentin Pavlock's third victim, identifying the P-38's red-painted rudders and 434th FS letter 'K'. Lt Walter Neumann was flying the fourth P-38 in Pavlock's 'Newcross' flight, and he saw his first victim crash. It was an Fw 190 (the only example claimed on this date by the group), whose pilot took to his parachute at 5000 ft after the fuselage of his aircraft suffered multiple hits. The German fighter crashed into a nearby field.

434th FS CO Lt Col James Herren also claimed three kills during this action. He had followed Zemke and the 435th FS down at the very beginning of the engagement, observing his group commander attack a lone Bf 109 as well as a much larger gaggle just ahead of it. The Lightnings had built up their speed in their descent from 16,000 ft, allowing Herren and the 434th to successfully bounce the unwary gaggle of 40 enemy fighters. He noted in his combat report;

'I tagged onto two Me 109s and opened fire at close range from dead astern. I observed strikes all around the cockpit. Billowy black smoke then poured out. The other '109 broke away and, since I was out of position, I sent my wingman, Lt Richard McChrystal, to attack him. I pulled up and orbited to pick him up again, noticing the Me 109 that I had attacked hit the ground and explode.

'Before my wingman could rejoin, I sighted another Me 109 on the tail of a P-51. After two turns, I positioned myself behind the attacking '109, fired a long burst and observed strikes all over the enemy aircraft. Black smoke and flames began to pour out of the forward fuselage and wing roots as pieces of cowlings flew off. The enemy aircraft then fell into an uncontrollable spin.

'Our altitude at this time was around 6000 ft. I could not wait to see this German hit the ground since there was another one on my tail. I shook this one by climbing until he stalled out. Then I saw another Me 109 attacking a P-38, so I moved in. The German pulled up into a steep climb during his attack and was going very slowly. After I got into position, I thought I had an easy target at close range, but before I could open fire the pilot bailed out. He evidently saw me closing in and figured that he had had it.'

Future ace Lt George Gleason became the third pilot from the 434th FS to claim a trio of kills on 26 September. His first aerial successes (he had 2.5 strafing victories from 18 August) since arriving in the ETO in May, Gleason entered the battle as 'Newcross White Three'. Twisting and turning in the general melee, he had already sent one Bf 109 down when he went after another Messerschmitt that he spotted attacking a P-38. After a wild chase, he fired a 60- to 30-degree burst which hit the aircraft's canopy and left wing. The Bf 109 rolled over and dived into the ground, taking its pilot with it.

Another Messerschmitt then tried to meet Gleason in a head on-pass, although the P-38 pilot reacted more quickly and succeeded in latching onto his opponent's tail. He then opened fire, observing strikes on the fighter's fuselage and wings. The pilot bailed out moments later. Gleason then attacked a fourth Bf 109, seeing his rounds hit home prior to running out of ammunition – he was credited with having damaged this machine.

'Newcross Blue Flight' leader 1Lt Harold Grenning was also successful, bouncing 40+ Bf 109s southeast of Munster. He reported;

'The squadron started down on them and they split up. I saw ten Me 109s heading due east at approximately 9000 ft, so we went after them. We were closing on them at 8000 ft, but I saw that they would reach a bank of clouds before I could catch them at close range.

'I fired a few short bursts at the enemy aircraft on the right and missed the first time because he was making slight turns and dives as evasive action. I corrected and then observed a number of strikes on his right wing. The German then went into a small cloud, which I pulled up and to the side of. He didn't come out the other side, so I circled wide and to the right around the cloud and observed the enemy aircraft spinning down out of the cloud. I saw him crash into the ground below. I then turned to help out my wingman, who was in a dogfight.'

Grenning's claim was confirmed by Lt John Hansen, who was leading the second element;

'I observed Lt Grenning attacking an Me 109 which went into a cloud at about 7000 ft. Lt Grenning went around the cloud but I went through it. When I came out the other side I saw the enemy aircraft which Lt Grenning had attacked spinning down. It didn't seem to be out of control but it crashed into the ground and exploded.'

Hansen also claimed one Bf 109 destroyed and damaged another, while other 434th FS pilots added six more Messerschmitts to the total. Both Lt Col Herren and Lt Gleason now each boasted five confirmed victories apiece, following previous strafing successes.

Only two claims were confirmed for the 436th FS (compared to ten for the 435th and 17 for the 434th), which were the squadron's sixth and seventh P-38 victories of the war. It had been the last unit to enter the general battle, which was probably the reason why only one flight managed to close with the Bf 109s. Lt Hans Grasshoff was leading 'Bison Blue' Flight, and he scored one confirmed victory, while his wingman, Lt Gerald Mulvaney, got the other by default. The latter encounter is described in Mulvaney's report;

'My Flight Leader made a diving pass at three Me 109s. We closed up fast. The Me 109 that my flight leader was following split-essed. I was flying on the right side when a '109 made a pass, starting at "one o'clock" to me. I violently broke head-on into him and started firing. I out-turned him and he passed in front of me, pulled up and bailed out of his aeroplane. I observed no good hits on the Me 109. He just straightened out of his turn and bailed out.'

With 29 confirmed claims, the 479th had achieved one of the highest scores in a single combat attributed to any VIII Fighter Command group to date. Part of the credit must go to Col Hubert Zemke, who expertly positioned his fighters immediately above and behind the enemy aircraft. It was also the most successful combat for Eighth Air Force P-38s, which accounted for 19 of the enemy fighters destroyed.

Actual German losses were 20 to 23 Bf 109s and a single Fw 190 (possibly from *Stab* JG 4 or I./JG 3) destroyed. The pilots of five Bf 109s from JG 53 were specifically identified in German records as having been being claimed by P-38 pilots. Gefreiter Ludwig Dorrer was flying Bf 109G-6 'White 9' of 10./JG 53 when he was wounded and bailed out over Haltern/Hylsten. Unteroffizier Georg Kleeman was at the controls of Bf 109G-6 'Black 6' of 11./JG 53 when he was also wounded – he took to his parachute over Oestrich. Unteroffizier Heinz Kempa was flying Bf 109G-6 'Black 1', also of 11./JG 53, and he was killed when his fighter crashed 37 km southwest of Munster. Finally, Unteroffizier Alfred Freiboth was flying Bf 109G-14/AS 'Black 22' when he was shot down by P-38s near Haltern.

Experten Hauptmann Alfred Grislawski was also claimed by P-38 pilots when he was caught while attacking a Lightning, and he abandoned his fighter shortly after being seriously wounded – Bf 109G-14 'Black 6' crashed near Munster. Grislawski was a high-scoring Luftwaffe fighter ace who had just claimed his 133rd aerial victory (the P-38 he was attacking) when he was in turn shot down. Enjoying great success on the Eastern Front with III./JG 52 from September 1941, Grislawski was reputedly responsible for teaching 352-victory ace Erich Hartmann how to attack the armoured Il-2 *Shturmovik* – the former claimed 16 of them.

Assigned to Defence of the Reich duties in August 1943, Grislawski had downed 17 B-17s and a B-24 during the previous 13 months. He had transferred from 8./JG 1 to 11./JG 53 as its *Staffelkapitän* in late July 1944, and his unit would now be led by 22-kill ace Leutnant Gunther Landt, who also claimed a P-38 during the 26 September engagement, as did JG 53's Feldwebel Polak.

For the 479th FG, the day's only loss was P-38J-5 42-67264 flown by 2Lt Harry Little of the 434th FS. Squadronmate Lt Walter Drake may have been the last to see Little's Lightning during the battle, and he later reported this observation;

'I was flying "Newcross White" position when we bounced some 40 Me 109s. I had been fighting for about 10-15 minutes when I observed a P-38, or what I thought was a P-38, at about 5000-6000 ft with an engine on fire. Then it began to spin down smoking. I lost sight of it right away, for I was pretty busy.'

Harry Little had made a high-speed crash-landing in his crippled fighter near Gross Reken, northwest of Haltern, and had been fortunate to escape with only a broken hip. Unable to evade capture, he was hospitalised at Buer and remained a PoW until he was repatriated after the war.

Three Lightnings were also claimed by JG 300, thus making it difficult to determine who had in fact shot Little down. Oberfahnrich Klaus Grothues of 9./JG 300 announced over the radio at 1705 hrs that he had knocked out an engine of a P-38, but was unable to observe it crash prior to being set upon by other 479th fighters. Gefreiter Hans Gerber, also from 9./JG 300, claimed a P-38 which he believed to have crashed northwest of Haltern. Finally, Feldwebel Heinrich Knaack of 12./JG 300 was also credited with downing a P-38, although he was in turn forced to bail out of his Bf 109 after having been attacked, and wounded, by P-51s.

A bombed-up, but sadly anonymous, P-38J and its pilot prepare to depart on a dive-bombing mission from Wattisham in the late summer of 1944. Note the trio of equally anonymous Mustangs parked on the opposite side of the taxiway from the Lightning – a sign of things to come for the 479th FG. In fact the only P-51Bs issued to the group were a handful of war-weary airframes used for pilot training (Scutts)



Most of the 11 Messerschmitt fighters lost by JG 300 were claimed by Mustangs from the 435th FS. Those pilots identified by name were Unteroffizier Karl Irle (in Bf 109G-14 'Black 10' of 9./JG 300), Leutnant Hans-Werner Kahl (in Bf 109G-14/AS 'Yellow 3' of II./JG 300), Oberfahnrich Fred Thoms (in Bf 109G-14/AS 'Yellow 11' of II./JG 300) and Feldwebel Wilhelm Peter (in Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 13' of 12./JG 300).

One other pilot, identified as Leutnant Lutz-Gottfried Hengst of 9./JG 300, was fighting with several P-38s at low altitude near Haltern when he took hits in his radiator. He had no choice but to parachute from low altitude, and his canopy opened very near to the ground. Hengst escaped without serious harm, having had the improbable luck of landing on the back of a startled cow!

For their part, the new Mustangs of the 479th FG had made an auspicious combat debut by claiming ten Bf 109s during this epic aerial battle. Zemke was extremely enthusiastic about the P-51. He had lobbied hard to have his old 56th FG convert to the type, but the loyal P-47 Thunderbolt pilots would reportedly have none of it. Perhaps this is why he was determined to ensure that the Mustangs of his new group would enjoy the best possible combat debut.

It was, in any case, the culmination of an outstanding period of service for the 479th FG, and praise was duly showered on it by Eighth Air Force Headquarters. Between 18 August and 26 September 1944, the 479th had accounted for 40 enemy aircraft in the air and made a similar number of ground claims. It had also destroyed numerous other transport-related targets on the ground. It was a remarkable record that was suitably rewarded with a DUC. Full conversion to the P-51 was to lead to the group accruing even more honours in coming months.

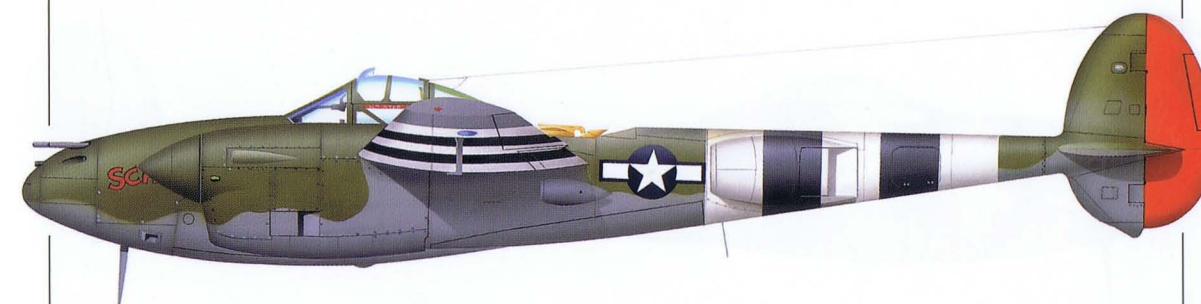
Capt Claire Duffie was forced to crash-land P-51D 44-14355 at nearby Martlesham Heath when the fighter's engine quit prior to him reaching Wattisham in late September 1944. One of the 479th FG's original, and most successful, pilots, he claimed three aerial and 8.5 strafing victories in P-38s and P-51s during tours with both the 434th and 436th FSs (USAF)



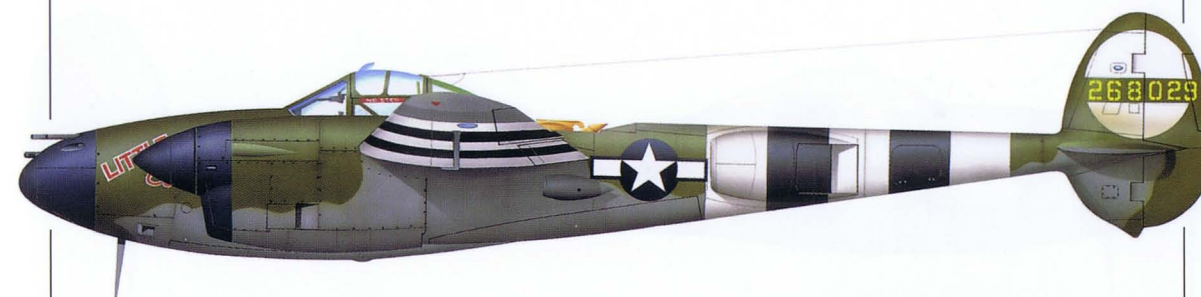
COLOUR PLATES



1
P-38J-10 42-67973 of Lt Victor Wolski, 436th FS, Wattisham, May 1944



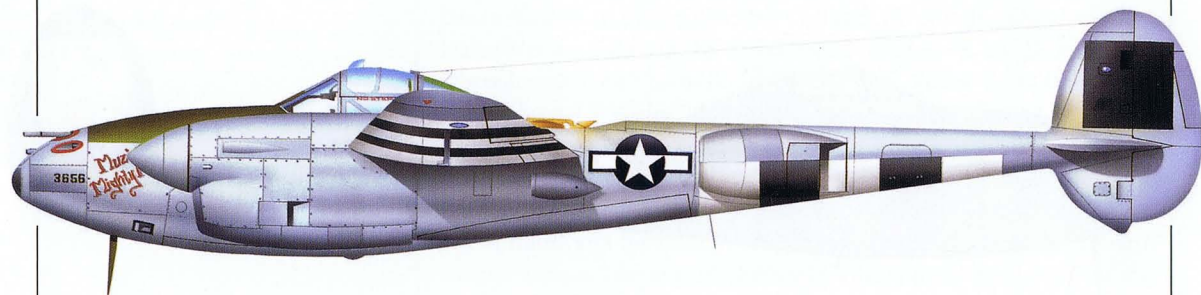
2
P-38J-10 (serial unknown) of Capt Robin Olds, 434th FS, Wattisham, June 1944



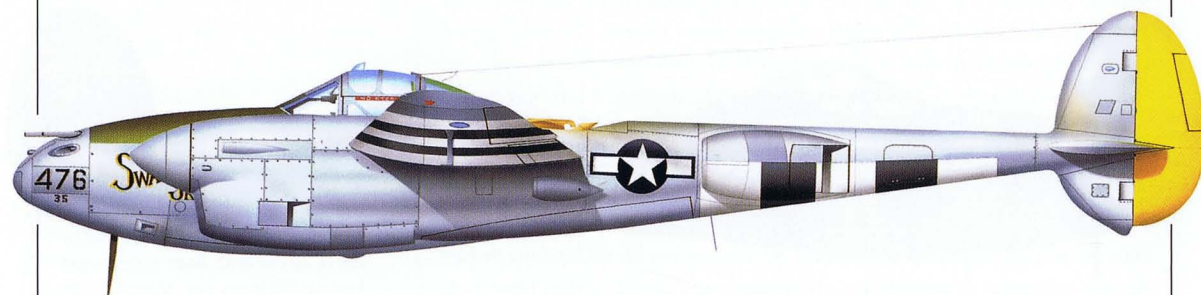
3
P-38J-10 42-68029 of Lt Berkley E Hollister, 434th FS, Wattisham, June 1944



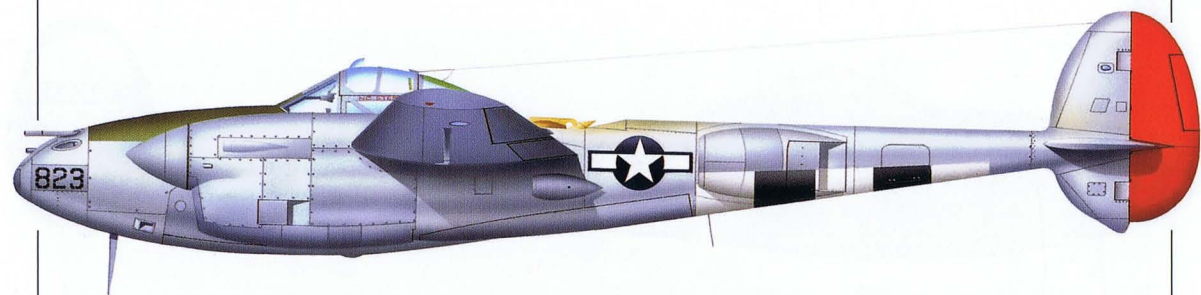
4
P-38J-15 43-28714 of Lt Arnold G Holding, 434th FS, Wattisham, June 1944



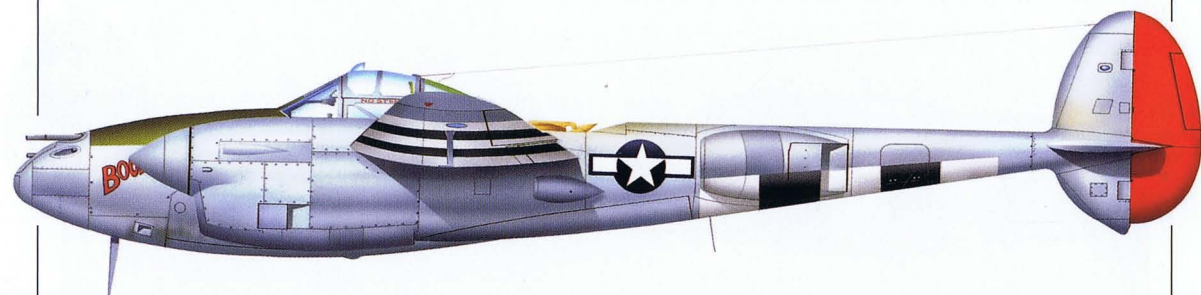
5
P-38J-25 44-23656 of Lt Richard S Spencer Jr, 436th FS, Wattisham, July 1944



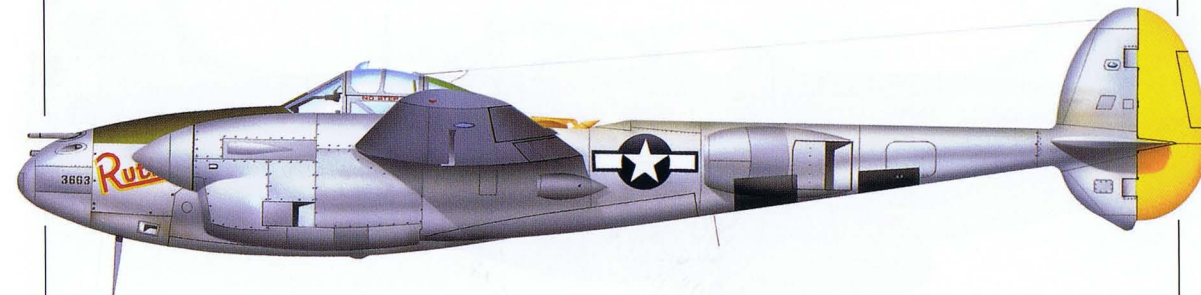
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P-38J-15 43-28476 of Capt William M Gates, 435th FS, Wattisham, July 1944



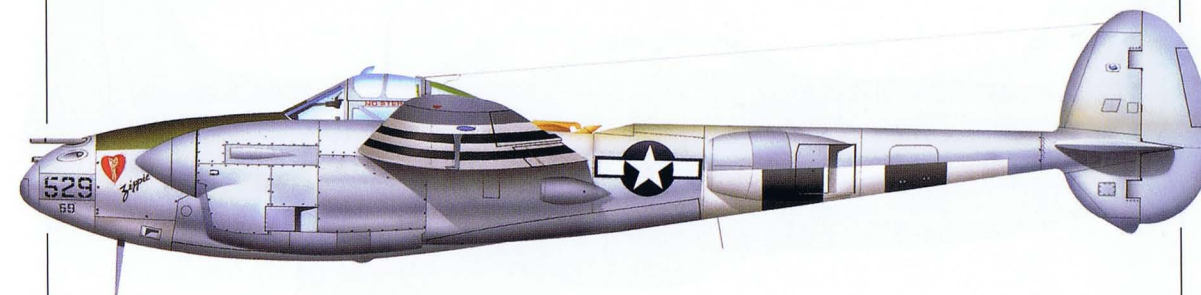
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P-38J-15 43-28823 of Col Hubert Zemke, HQ 479th FG, Wattisham, August 1944



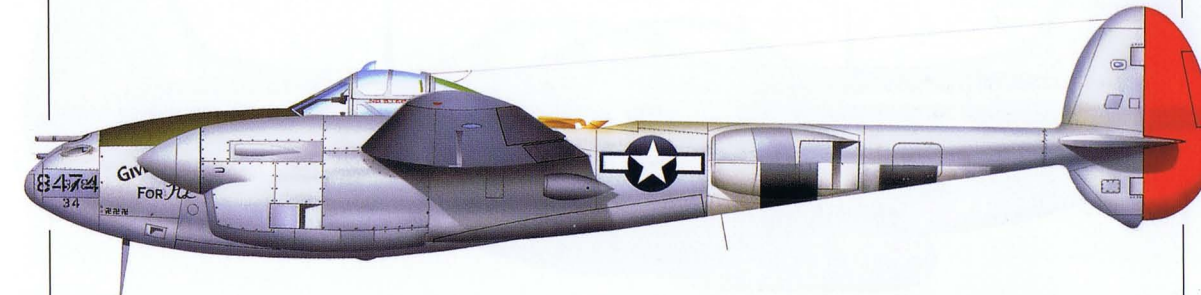
8
P-38J-15 42-104425 of Capt Arthur Jeffrey, 434th FS, Wattisham, August 1944



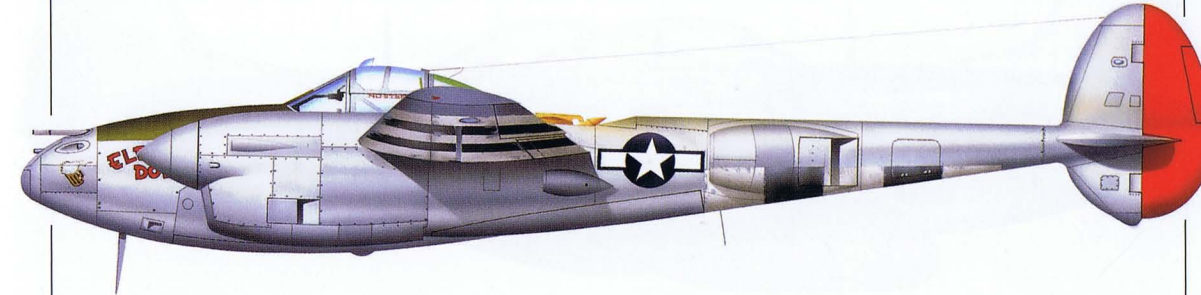
9
P-38J-25 44-23663 of Lt Phillip Gossard, 435th FS, Wattisham, August 1944



10
P-38J-15 43-28529 of Capt Hans Grasshoff, 436th FS, Wattisham, August 1944



11
P-38J-15 43-28474 of Capt Claire A P Duffie, 434th FS, Wattisham, September 1944



12
P-38J-15 43-28376 of Capt Hiram Turner, 434th FS, Wattisham, September 1944



13

P-51D-10 44-14351 of Col Hubert Zemke, HQ 479th FG, Wattisham, September 1944



14

P-51D-10 44-14378 of Lt Ray K Friend, 435th FS, Wattisham, September 1944



15

P-51D-10 44-14354 of Lt Phillip D Gossard, 435th FS, Wattisham, October 1944



16

P-51D-10 44-14212 of Lt Thomas C Olson, 434th FS, Wattisham, November 1944



17

P-51D-20 44-63175 of Lt William H Daudistel, 434th FS, Wattisham, November 1944



18

P-51D-10 44-14574 of Lt Hans J Grasshoff, 436th FS, Wattisham, November 1944



19

P-51D-20 44-62349 of Lt Robert H Herman, 435th FS, Wattisham, November 1944



20

P-51D-10 44-14651 of Capt Berkley Hollister and Lt John C Donnell, 434th FS, Wattisham, November 1944



21
P-51D-10 44-11214 of Lt Ron C Maley, 434th FS, Wattisham, December 1944



22
P-51D-10 44-14426 of Capt Robin Olds, 434th FS, Wattisham, December 1944



23
P-51D-10 44-14532 of Lt Henry P Plunk, 436th FS, December 1944



24
P-51K-5 44-11674 of Lt Col Arthur F Jeffrey, 434th FS, Wattisham, December 1944



25
P-51D-10 44-14423 of Lt Robert I Bromschwig, 434th FS, Wattisham, December 1944



26
P-51K-5 44-11746 of Capt Robin Olds, 434th FS, Wattisham, January 1945



27
P-51D-10 44-14392 of Lt Norman Benoit, 435th FS, Wattisham, December 1944



28
P-51D-10 44-14327 of Col Kyle L Riddle, HQ, 479th FG, Wattisham, December 1944



29
P-51D-15 44-15380 of Lt Gail E Jacobson, 434th FS, Wattisham, December 1944



30
P-51D-15 44-15317 of Lt Eugene Sears, 434th FS, Wattisham, January 1945



31
P-51D-15 44-15086 of Lt John W Morrow, 434th FS, Wattisham, January 1945



32
P-51D-20 44-63192 of Lt Arlett G Mosier, 436th FS, Wattisham, January 1945



33
P-51D-10 44-14740 of Lt George W Gleason, 434th FS, Wattisham, January 1945



34
P-51D-10 44-14645 of Capt Claire A P Duffie, 436th FS, Wattisham, February 1945



35
P-51D-20 44-72431 of Lt Ernest J Hopcroft, 436th FS, Wattisham, March 1945



36
P-51D-20 44-73138 of Capt Vern E Hooker, 435th FS, Wattisham, April 1945



1
479th FG



2
434th FS (early version)



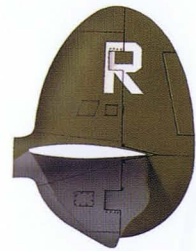
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434th FS (late version)



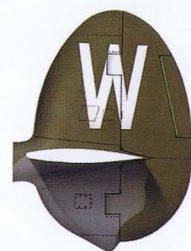
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435th FS



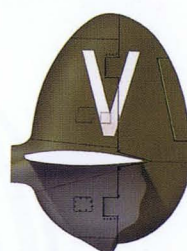
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436th FS



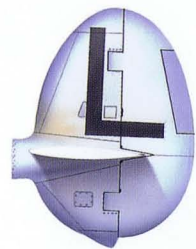
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2
P-38J-10 (serial unknown)



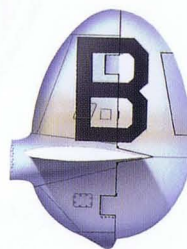
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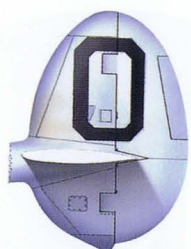
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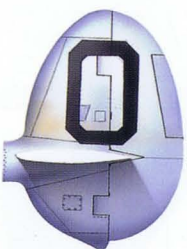
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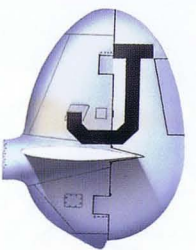
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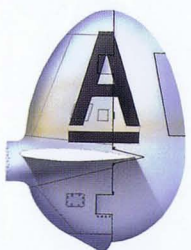
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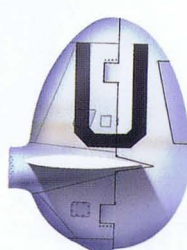
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11
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12
P-38J-15 43-28376

P-38 VERSUS P-51

Few would dispute that in aerial combat the Merlin-engined North American P-51 Mustang was the dominant US single-engined fighter of World War 2. Even the most devoted P-38 veteran would acknowledge the Mustang's ability to master most piston-engined opponents, at least under certain conditions. The P-51 was a truly great air superiority fighter, and its performance was clearly superior to the P-38.

The fighter's arrival at Wattisham came shortly after Col Hubert Zemke had joined the 479th FG as a replacement for Lt Col Kyle Riddle. A consummate leader, Zemke's record with the 56th and 479th FGs was near legendary, so his opinion on USAAF fighters in the ETO should be respected. Having said that, his disdain for the P-38 is based on disputable facts, and should be taken with a degree of reserve. Basically, he considered the Lightning to be an obsolescent failure in the ETO because of its mechanical troubles at altitude, its frail construction and apparent low survivability.

Zemke made the following scathing comments about the P-38 in his biography *The Hub – Fighter Leader*, written by legendary British author Roger Freeman;

'The Lockheed P-38 Lightning was heralded as a wonder fighter when it first appeared in 1939, being faster than anything else in the sky, very manoeuvrable and with good firepower. It transpired that the design had some inherent weaknesses that were never fully overcome, however. The most serious was tail buffeting in high-speed dives which led to restrictions that were a handicap in combat. Due to the peculiarities of the design, at very high speeds airflow over the cockpit and wing centre section became turbulent and hammered round the tailplane linking the two fuselage booms. Lockheed and the Air Force tried in vain to cure this – they never succeeded as far as I know.

'A large aeroplane for a fighter, the P-38 could turn as well as most single-engined interceptors at low altitudes, and it had good speed. In the Pacific, our people developed a successful technique for employing it against Japanese fighters with great success. The P-38 was popular there by virtue of its range being superior to all other American pursuits available during the early war years, and with plenty of over-water flying, two engines were a comfort.

'The same should have applied in Europe too, but the operational circumstances and climatic conditions were different. Here, the P-38 was a big flop, although the Air Force would never admit it as they believed their own propaganda.

'The Allison engines were the main trouble. At low and medium altitudes they were fine, but at high altitude they were hopeless. The design just couldn't take the combination of extreme cold and high humidity that characterised flight over Europe, especially in winter. Engine failure had been rife during the winter of 1943-44 when the P-38s really began to see action. The position had improved by the summer of 1944, but they still were not 100 percent.



Col Hubert Zemke was an ardent P-51 supporter, considering it to be head and shoulders above any other fighter. His disdain of the P-38, however, represented an effort to influence the views of the pilots under his command. Zemke's opinion was not based on an objective assessment of the aircraft's merits. Nevertheless, he was one of the great fighter leaders of the war and would probably have been successful no matter which type of aircraft he had flown in combat (Tabatt collection)

'There were several good points about the type though. Without doubt it was an excellent gun platform. All five guns – four 0.50-cal machine guns and a 20 mm cannon – were in the nose compartment ahead of the pilot. This made the estimation of range much less critical as, unlike the P-47 and P-51 with their wing-mounted guns, the fire didn't converge.'

Col Zemke was ardently in favour of the P-51, thinking that better results could be achieved with the Mustang than with any other available type, and that may have coloured his view of other USAAF fighters, including the P-47 with which his 56th FG was so successful.

It is not productive to argue against the P-51, but Zemke was unfairly harsh on the P-38 on at least two points. Part of the Lightning's trouble in the ETO was that it had fewer champions than in the Pacific. When the P-38 was introduced into that theatre – and the Mediterranean for that matter – the units receiving the aircraft were not operating in the same kind of pressure cooker atmosphere as that in which VIII Fighter Command existed in the ETO. The Eighth Air Force's heavy bomber groups were suffering badly at the hands of the Jagdwaffe when P-38s began to arrive in quantity in East Anglia in the summer and autumn of 1943. Indeed, the future of the daylight bombing campaign was under threat, and the Eighth Air Force looked to the long-range P-38 to provide full mission escort for its vulnerable B-17s and B-24s.

In the Pacific and the Mediterranean, fighter groups were happy to receive the P-38, as it was clearly superior to the fighters that they had been flying up until then – mainly P-39s and P-40s. The aerial opposition in these theatres was also less robust, and there were far fewer heavy bombers

to escort. Commanders in the Pacific and MTO were therefore obliged to see the P-38 in the best possible light. It was not so in the high-priority atmosphere of the ETO, where group commanders of VIII Fighter Command units often blamed the P-38 (and, to a lesser degree, the P-47) for their inability to provide full mission escorts for the beleaguered heavy bomber units. Hence, ETO commanders looked to the Packard-built Rolls-Royce Merlin-engined P-51 as the solution to their problems. Inevitably, the Mustang became the USAAF's primary escort fighter from early 1944 until war's end.

Col Zemke also claimed that the P-38 was a fragile aircraft that suffered many losses. He overlooked the fact that the P-51 was highly susceptible to flak damage due to its coolant-cooled engine. Indeed, it sustained far greater losses than the Lightning when strafing ground targets. Cynics might also note that if Zemke had been flying a P-38 rather than a Mustang on his last combat mission, he might have stood a better chance of getting through the extreme weather conditions that brought his P-51D down.

ROBIN OLDS' VIEW

Like his CO, Robin Olds was also a P-51 enthusiast, but he was not as anti-P-38 as Zemke – he achieved ace status in the Lightning after all. 'Mutual admiration' best describes the relationship between Col Zemke and the young Olds. Zemke was aware of the spirited, youthful Olds from the youngster's days as a 'military brat' (he was the son of Maj Gen Robert Olds, who commanded the 2nd Bombardment Group in the late 1930s) and firebrand who had gained his wings just prior to his graduation from West Point. Olds reciprocated the feeling, considering Zemke to be a great fighter leader and group commander.

In the 1970s, Brig Gen Robin Olds gave his opinion on the two types of fighter aircraft that he had flown with the 434th FS in World War 2. He wrote;

'The P-38 was a wonderful fighter in many respects, and having been weaned on it, I loved it, up to a point. It was fast, easy to fly (once you really knew it) and would turn with the best of them, providing you had an exceedingly strong right arm. It was honest in most respects, giving ample stall warning under all flight conditions, and easy to recover if you ignored it. With proper power management, it had fine endurance, and could cover the bombers all the way in and out again. Its four 0.50-cal machine guns and its single 20 mm cannon gave it good firepower. It was acceptably rugged and could absorb a respectable beating and still get you home.'

That was the extent of his praise for the P-38, which had three limiting factors. According to Olds, they were virtually non-existent cockpit heating, the illogical ergonomics of the cockpit design and the severe dive limitations posed by the fighter's tendency to enter the potentially lethal realm of compressibility when descending at high speed from high altitude. Another negative feature mentioned by Olds was one that was really never solved;

'Apparently, the P-38's turbo superchargers were next to impossible to trim during ground maintenance for, at altitude, the pilot, more often than not, got too much boost from one and not enough from the other.'



Maj Robin Olds had a good measure of affection for the P-38, but he was also highly enthusiastic about the P-51, which was his favourite mount (Tabatt collection)

Another item on the debit side was the P-38's distinctive twin boom configuration, about which Olds commented, 'I always felt the Luftwaffe delighted in this characteristic, for it gave them the choice to engage or disengage at will'. Overall, Olds' conclusion is rather more generous than Zemke's;

'In spite of all this, the P-38 was a good air-to-air fighting machine. The one glaring defect that kept it from being superior in air combat was the unalterable and ever-present aerodynamic fact that once pointed down in any prolonged dive it would continue in that direction regardless of what you, Lockheed, Allison or any other responsible authority wanted to do about it'

His appreciation of the P-38 was outweighed by his enthusiasm for the P-51;

'Much as we liked the P-38, we knew what the P-51 "Spam Can" would do, and we wanted a piece of the action. For the pilots who had never flown a single-engined fighter before, the conversion was something of a minor trauma. This little beauty had prop torque a-plenty,

and we quickly found it necessary to convert our strong right arms to strong right legs. It also took a bit of self-hypnosis to ignore the peculiar sounds the Merlin engine always made the moment you flew over any stretch of water. But the joy of flying that absolutely fabulous machine far out-matched any of its annoying little habits.

'At last we sat in comfort, plenty of room for legs, arms, shoulders and head, ample heat at any altitude, fantastic pilot visibility all around (except over the nose, of course, and who cared what was in front) and a range capability we hadn't dreamed of. In all, the Mustang was truly a fighter pilot's dream, and today it still remains one the two best machines I have ever flown.'

One of the negative detail aspects of the Lightning that seemed to particularly irritate Olds was the installation of the gun-camera in the nose under the cannon. To him, the individual who decided to place it there was a 'knothead' who failed to realise that the vibration of the cannon firing would jerk the picture into blurred uselessness. Some of the probable kills attributed to P-38 pilots might have been confirmed if better gun-camera pictures had been available. After the 479th FG relinquished its P-38s, the camera was moved from the nose to the left wing drop tank shackle, and perfectly acceptable images were produced from then on.

Another unappreciated P-38 feature mentioned by Olds was its susceptibility to compressibility, which severely restricted its performance when in a dive. There is no evidence to suggest that the 479th FG ever received the P-38J-25 subtype – a model reputed to be the fastest version of the Lightning to reach series production, and the one with the best dive performance thanks to the installation of a new flap under the outer wing sections.

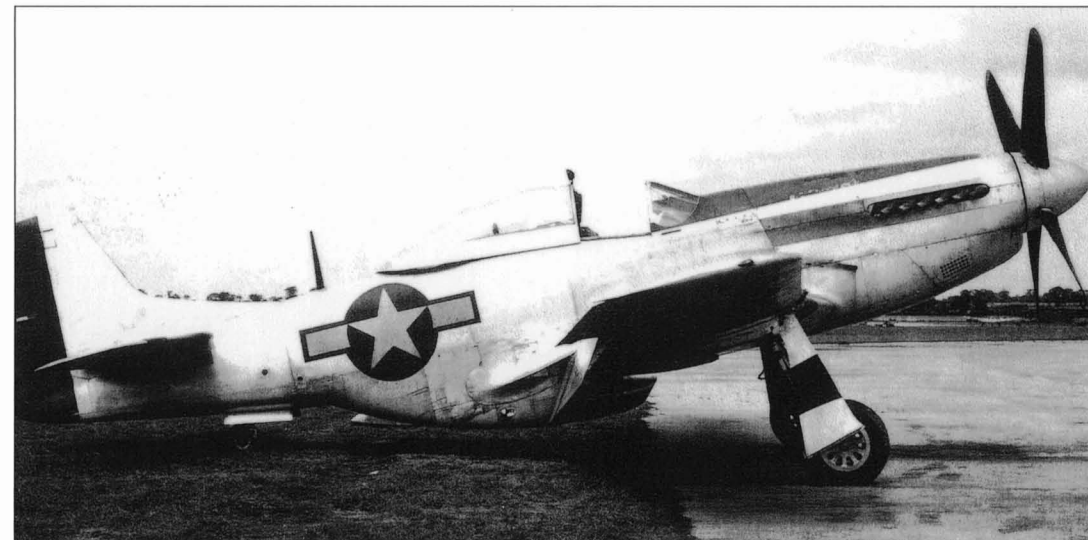
Lockheed claimed that only the rocket-powered Me 163 could out-dive the P-38J-25. While such a boast could easily have been an exaggeration, there is no doubt that the new installation performed well in combat. Ironically, in the ETO, the version with the best altitude performance was largely relegated to flying ground attack missions with the Ninth Air Force in 1944-45.

The J-25 subtype was about 740 lbs lighter than the subsequent L-model, which in turn made it faster. It was also equipped with power-actuated ailerons, and they dramatically improved the P-38's rate of roll. Robin Olds is believed to have had an opportunity to try the P-38L equipped with dive flaps and aileron boost, although he later claimed to have no recollection of it. However, the 434th FS history carried this entry for 8 July 1945;

'Lt C L Hilpert from the 474th FG dropped in to visit, and he brought a P-38L with him. There was an immediate mad scramble to fly the "little beauty", with Maj Olds, Capt Hollingsworth and Lt Tucker putting on a fine display of plain and fancy aerobatics to the delight of the men and the disapproval of certain higher authorities. The "single-engine drivers" looked on in awe, with just a little envy mixed in. They had the last laugh, though, when the disapproving authorities suggested that perhaps the three pilots would be happy on the ground for a week, where they would feel no urge to wring out an aircraft below 5000 ft.'

The 'Lt Tucker' who participated in this demonstration flight was Albert Tucker Jr, who had been shot down by flak on 22 June 1944. In April 2008 he wrote a letter to James Hollingsworth's son, Tom, in which he offered a hearty endorsement of the Lightning;

This brand-new P-51D was photographed shortly after it had been assigned to the 479th FG, as indicated by the fighter's lack of codes and artwork (Tabatt collection)



'Basically, I am convinced that the P-38 was better than the Mustang in most of the important areas of performance that distinguish one fighter type aircraft from another. The P-38 was faster and could out-climb and out-turn the Mustang – and most other American and German aircraft in World War 2 for that matter. Its one serious shortcoming with respect to other fighters was the excessive speed it was capable of attaining in a dive from above 25,000-30,000 ft. When heading down in a dive from these heights, the P-38 was prone to attain speeds above "compressibility", causing it to temporarily lose elevator control until the aircraft had dived to an altitude below 10,000 ft.

'I don't have information on how often this happened, but I am aware that a few P-38 pilots died in such out-of-control dives from which they couldn't recover. Robin Olds, I know, deliberately made such a dive in a P-38J-5 in England before we started combat missions, and reported that it was very frightening. Indeed, he stated that he wasn't at all sure whilst in the dive whether he would be successful in pulling out of it. He recommended that no pilot should undertake this manoeuvre on purpose during training flights, and that all pilots be very wary of putting the nose down in a high-speed chase from high altitudes in combat because the aeroplane was capable of speeds beyond its controllability.

'The excessive speed problem was totally eliminated, however, when the P-38L was introduced. That model incorporated a small power-driven flap on the lower side of each wing which gave the pilot immediate upward elevator control at any speed in a dive. Now the P-38 could be split-essed from 40,000 ft so that the pilot could make use of its great speed advantage over any enemy fighter below 25,000 ft. At the same time the L-model was also equipped with aileron boost, which gave the very large wing-spanned P-38 a rate of roll better than any German or Japanese fighter. Unfortunately, by command decision all remaining Lightnings in Europe were transferred to the Ninth and Fifteenth Air Forces prior to the arrival of the P-38L in-theatre.'

Tucker also praised the P-38's armament;

'Wing-mounted guns, of course, introduced greater opportunity for lack of concentration of fire when the target was either behind the harmonisation "sweet spot" of the guns or beyond that range. A further degradation in the concentration of fire occurred when the pilot of a single-engined attacking aircraft, who was having to deal with engine prop torque, failed to account for a change in his indicated air speed. This caused the ball in his turn and bank indicator to show either a slip or a skid. If the ball was not centred, the line of fire, though well aimed, could be right or left of the target. This couldn't happen in the P-38, which, because of counter-rotating propellers from its two engines, was free of torque.'

FLY-OFF

After VE-Day, Lt Tucker returned to Wattisham, where he had an opportunity to fly the P-38 again when surplus aircraft were being transported to RAF Burtonwood for disposal.

Capt Dick Creighton, who had been one of Tucker's instructors in the US prior to joining the 434th FS in September 1944, had shot down two German fighters in the P-51 (he later went on to 'make ace' flying F-86As

with the 336th FS/4th FW in Korea in 1951 when he downed five MiG-15s). Upon seeing Tucker again when he returned to the 479th FG, Creighton claimed that he could 'fly the pants off' him on any occasion. To test the matter, Tucker suggested a contest that would see him fly a P-38L against Creighton in a P-51D.

Once airborne, at 10,000 ft Tucker proved that he could out-turn and out-climb Creighton, thus making it virtually impossible for the latter pilot to shake the P-38 off his tail. Creighton had to admit that the Lightning was better than he had thought, but he still considered the P-51D/K to have superior acceleration.

In a further test, the two paired off at the same altitude and arranged a sprint to see which type was quicker off the mark. Tucker in his P-38 poured in full throttle at once and easily and steadily out-distanced the chagrined Mustang pilot. Afterwards, Creighton admitted that the P-38 was better across a wide range of flight characteristics, but he still maintained that he could fly the pants off Tucker if they were both in P-51s!

This fly-off was, of course, flown at the Lightning's favoured operational ceiling below 25,000 ft. Above that altitude, the P-38 was always plagued by mechanical difficulties and an unfavourable power-to-weight ratio that got significantly worse beyond 31,000 ft. The P-51 had the advantage of a laminar flow wing, which maintained a superior performance over the P-38 wing across a wide altitude range. The P-47 could challenge the Mustang above 18,000 ft, while the P-38 could give it

Capt George Gleason (centre, seen here as a lieutenant) was another pilot who was a firm believer that the P-38 was a superior a ground attack platform, proving it with 2.5 victories at Nancy/Elsey on 18 August 1944. However, he considered the P-51D to be much better at aerial combat – a belief he more than confirmed by scoring nine kills with the type. Gleason also downed three Bf 109s with the Lightning too (via Gleason)

436th FS pilot Lt Gerald Mulvaney stands beside his P-51D 44-14280 BOTTLENECK in the later stages of his combat tour. He was credited with 2.5 ground kills and an Fw 190 shot down during the course of 61 missions, flown between June 1944 and March 1945. All of Mulvaney's victories were scored flying a P-38J (via Blake)



Lt Arnold Holding (right) of the 434th FS recorded one aerial victory in this very P-51D (44-13864) on 25 December 1944. Assigned to the 479th FG from January 1944 through to January 1945, he saw considerable combat in both the Lightning and Mustang (Tabatt collection)



a run for its money below 24,000 ft, but the P-51 was still a formidable air superiority fighter over a wide range of flight regimes.

Capt Jim Hollingsworth also flew the P-38L during the unauthorised post-war demonstration, and his positive view of the fighter contrasted with that of his squadronmate, and ace, Capt George Gleason. Both served with the 479th FG, and each claimed three aerial victories with the Lightning – in Hollingsworth's case in the MTO – plus several on the ground. Following his tour with the 14th FG in October 1943, Hollingsworth stated;

'The P-38 has tremendous firepower, climbs fast and is quick and vicious in its response to attack from any quarter. It is the most powerful and versatile fighter-bomber aircraft being used by either side at this time.'

Hollingsworth was probably speaking about the P-38G model, which he often used on low-level attack operations in 1943. He retained a fondness for the P-38J that he flew with the 479th, and perhaps considered that its ground attack potential tipped the balance in its favour over the P-51.

Gleason went on to score nine confirmed aerial victories in the P-51 and, not surprisingly, considered it to be a superior weapon against the Luftwaffe. However, he too spoke positively about the P-38 as a ground attack aircraft, reportedly citing its firepower and amazing quietness in the approach as being among its key attributes.

Squadronmate Lt Col Art Jeffrey, who was also the 479th FG's ranking aerial ace, was dispassionate in his views of the two aircraft types, even though he pushed the P-38 to its performance limit during his 29 July 1944 pursuit of the Me 163. He simply stated that the P-51 was superior in aerial combat.

Former 436th FS pilot Lt Herman Holverstn offered an interesting viewpoint on the respective ranges of the two aircraft. His comments were initially published in the *Eighth Air Force News*, and later reprinted in the *P-38 National Association Newsletter*. He wrote;

'I'll have to leave its dogfighting capability to others, because I never found it necessary to try to turn inside a German fighter, but I do take exception to the claim that the P-51 could fly further and longer than a



P-38. That's a claim that it seems has been made by everybody since I last flew it. I would gladly wager a large sum of money that given that the two aeroplanes were fitted with full drop tanks, the P-38 would be airborne for at least an hour longer than the P-51.

'Although I never tested this proposition, I did fly both aircraft on combat missions over Germany in 1944, and do assert that my butt got a lot sorer from the hours and hours I spent on patrol over enemy territory in the P-38 thanks to its superior range. In fact I found it a relief to run low on fuel in the Mustang following our type conversion because of the above-mentioned discomfort.'

Perhaps it is useful to consider the record of both types in service with the 479th FG, as well as more generally in the European theatre. The group's P-38s accounted for 52 aerial successes, while its P-51 pilots claimed just over 100. Overall, the Mustang claimed the lion's share of victories attributed to USAAF fighter groups in the ETO after it reached England in late 1943. Flown by 20 groups in total, the P-51 was credited with almost 5000 aerial kills – mostly in northern Europe – between December 1943 and April 1945. The ten groups that flew the P-38 claimed just over 2000 victories during the same period. The loss rate was very similar for the two fighter types – 1.2 per cent for the Mustang against 1.4 for the P-38. The rugged P-47 suffered a loss rate of just 0.7.

A 435th FS P-51D is refuelled shortly after the unit converted onto the type in September 1944. The squadron recorded two aerial victories with the P-38 and 31.5 with the P-51 (Tabatt collection)

Capt Harold F 'Bud' Grenning of the 434th FS scored three victories in the Lightning – two strafing kills on 18 August and a Bf 109 shot down on 26 September. Sat in the cockpit of his P-51D 44-14393, Grenning served with the 479th from January to November 1944 (Grenning)





Lt Grenning sits on the leading edge of the wing of his P-51D 44-14393 *Flat Top Jr.*, which was named after the 'Dick Tracy' comic strip villain (Tabatt collection)

Another 434th FS pilot who heaped praise on the Lightning was Lt Harold F 'Bud' Grenning. He recently told the author that, 'As much as I loved flying the Mustang, my favourite was the Lightning. It was the greatest all-round fighter aeroplane ever built, being able to perform all manner of missions better than any other at the time'.

Grenning also pointed out that the P-38's distinctive shape allowed German interceptor pilots to avoid combat with bomber formations escorted by the type. This in turn meant that fewer bombers were attacked, and subsequently lost, when they were protected by Lightnings. In general, bomber losses were more supportable, according to USAAF examination, when the 'heavies' were under P-38 protection.

However, the Lightning's planform worked against it from mid-1944, when the Eighth Air Force drastically altered its strategic plan. From then on, fighter groups were encouraged to actively seek out and engage Luftwaffe fighters so that they could eliminate their number through constant attrition.

Single-engined Mustangs and Thunderbolts, which, from a distance, looked like Bf 109s and Fw 190s respectively, duly fought more engagements simply because they were often recognised too late for their adversaries to avoid combat. No enemy aircraft looked even remotely like a P-38, however.

It is also sobering to realise that the Lightning was used in fewer numbers over a wider field of deployment than any other American fighter type. While the P-51 was regrettably ignored until it was almost too late to deploy it, the North American fighter was quite adaptable to mass production once its merits had been realised – 12,000 examples had been accepted by the USAAF in short order by war's end. The P-47 was even more numerous, with 18,000+ produced, thus giving the Allies a great advantage over the strained German fighter resources. The P-51 also had the advantage of being more tractable, and therefore easier for inexperienced pilots to master. The combination of large numbers and superior performance made it ideal for the final stages of the European war.

One final note from the author's personal experience may show the subjective nature of the views held by wartime pilots in respect to the aircraft types that they flew in combat. During a P-38 veterans' convention some years ago, the late aviation writer Col Raymond Tolliver was talking about the P-38 in the most pejorative terms. One of the things that he said was that German pilots universally disdained the P-38. The audience meekly allowed the distinguished old gentleman to continue his attacks, except for one dominating figure who rose and stalked out of the hall. Before he reached the door, Robin Olds held up one hand with four fingers and a thumb outstretched and boomed in his commanding voice, 'I know five Germans who had respect for the P-38'.

MUSTANGS TO THE FORE!

It was on 28 September 1944 that Eighth Air Force P-38s fought their last aerial battle in the ETO. The 479th FG put up 22 P-51s (flown by the 434th and 435th FSs) and 23 P-38s (all 436th FS machines) to escort B-17s from the 1st BD that had been sent to bomb industrial targets in the Magdeburg area. 434th FS CO Lt Col James Herren was leading 'Newcross White' Section of eight P-51s when the 434th FS ran into an aggressive formation of Bf 109s and Fw 190s above and to the right of the bomber stream.

The squadron duly intercepted the enemy aircraft, leaving the P-38s of the 436th FS to deal with the German fighters coming in behind the bombers. Lt Col Herren's combat report described the action, which resulted in four confirmed claims for the 434th's new Mustangs;

'Just after rendezvousing with the bombers, we sighted an engagement at 28,000 ft to the right of the bomber track, so I took the section over to investigate. It turned out to be about ten Me 109s and one or two flights of white-nosed Fw 190s. I joined in a "Lufbery", and after two or three

These 434th FS groundcrewmembers are identified only by their last names. They are, from left to right (on wing), Beatty, Mayer, Larson and (standing) Whitman, Harris, Frank, James, Schmitt. Hackbarth is kneeling in the foreground (Tabatt collection)



turns I was in a position to fire at an Me 109. The German must have seen me because he started evasive action immediately. I chased him to the deck, where he started turning to the right. I was a little above him, so I closed fast and got in a good burst from "four o'clock", opening fire from 300 yards and closing to 150 yards. I observed many strikes in the cockpit, and as he continued his turn, the strikes moved down to the tail, parts of which I saw fly off. I had to pull up to the left to keep from hitting him, and as I did so I saw the pilot bail out.'

This action took place over a period of about 15 minutes some 30 miles west of Halberstadt.

Brand new 479th FG pilot Lt Bob Kline was flying on Herren's wing, and he momentarily lost sight of his leader while he chased two Bf 109s off his tail. Rejoining, he 'saw the pilot of the enemy aircraft that Lt Col Herren was attacking bail out'.

Lt George Gleason was flying as 'White Four', and he claimed a Bf 109 and an Fw 190 destroyed to register his fourth and fifth aerial victories. Squadronmate 2Lt Richard Lunstrum, who was in 'Newcross Red' Flight, saw Gleason shoot down his Fw 190. Lunstrum then claimed a Focke-Wulf of his own for the 434th's fourth, and last, confirmed kill of the day.

The group's German adversaries during this engagement were probably from JG 300, which the 479th had also encountered two days earlier. The *Geschwader* reported the loss of three fighters, including one flown by Major Alfred Lindenberger of *Stab II./JG 300*, who bailed out of his Fw 190A-8 'Blue 17' after being wounded – he landed near Halberstadt.

The 436th FS enjoyed an impressive day of combat at the somewhat lower altitude of 22,000 ft, sending the Lightning out in style. Coincidentally, the RAF had run some comparison tests between a P-38F and a captured Fw 190A, noting that the former stood its best chance of successful combat against the Focke-Wulf fighter at 22,000 ft.

The Lightning pilots also had an added advantage in that they were engaging heavily armoured Fw 190A-8/R2 and R8 *Sturmbock* variants of the German fighter, which JG 300 were operating in the area that day. The slower and less manoeuvrable *Sturmbock* had plenty of protection against return fire from American bombers, but pilots flying the bomber-destroyer depended on their comrades in more nimble standard Fw 190As to deal with escorting fighters.

Future 436th FS CO Maj Jules Biscayart was leading the unit, as well as 'Bison White' Flight, and he recalled his impressions of the engagement several years ago;

'On this day we witnessed a completely new tactic by the German fighters. Whereas previously they had made use of superior height and speed, attacking the bomber streams from the side, or occasionally from head-on, in small sections or individually, they were now massing in large numbers – up to 100 fighters – in a very close, tight formation or

"gaggle". They looked more like a flock of birds than a fighter formation. They now came in level with, or slightly below, the B-17s and B-24s at a slow closing speed and lined up dead astern, pitting their massed firepower against that of the bombers from a deadly no-deflection firing position.

'When we rendezvoused with the bombers west of Magdeburg, they were already coming under this kind of attack. The effect was devastating, with B-17s exploding and falling out of the sky. I had never seen so many aircraft going down in flames, or in pieces, in such a small area. There were 20 to 30 parachutes, some of which were on fire (the 1st BD lost no fewer than 23 B-17s on 28 September). I saw one Fw 190 spinning down vertically, minus its engine and propeller. I was glad that we weren't on the bombers' frequency to hear the frantic calls they must have been making.'

Biscayart claimed two Fw 190s from the formation, the second of which was abandoned by its pilot before he even opened fire. Lt Donald Dunn was credited with three Fw 190s, as was his element leader, Lt Victor Wolski, who reported;

'I was flying in No 3 position in "Bison White" Flight when a gaggle of about 60 enemy aircraft flying at 22,000 ft was observed near our bomber formation. We came on down behind them, and a few saw us and went hell bent for home. The main group stayed in position, however, flying straight and level and taking no evasive action at all.

'I drove into the lowest flight and opened up on one a bit too far away. I noticed hits on him and he split-essed away, damaged. I then closed to within 100 yards on another one, throttled back and gave him the business. I saw many strikes at the wing roots and in the fuselage. Smoke began pouring out of the rear of the fuselage, after which he slowly turned over and went down at least 8000 ft, still smoking furiously. I lost sight of him at that point because I had begun to concentrate on the next one. I closed on him and gave him about a five-second burst, knocking his aileron off, after which my wingman, Lt Dunn, neatly polished him off.

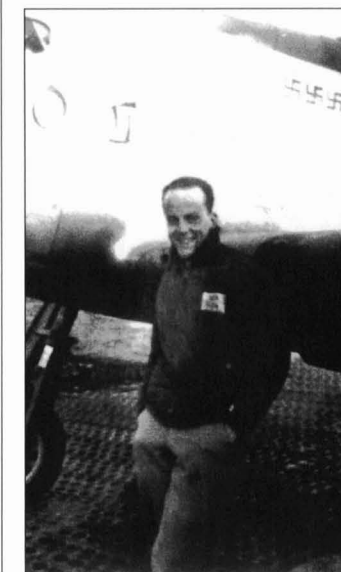
'The Fw 190s were headed straight for a box of bombers when I opened up on my last one, observing hits and a couple of parts coming off him, when I ran out of ammunition. The '190 broke left and down. I pulled up to the left and saw the pilot bail out. I was going to take a picture of the pilot when a '190 came at me from a 90-degree angle. Having no ammunition, I pulled to a head-on attack and he didn't waste any time in rolling over and going down.'

'Bison Red' Flight also got in on the action. 'Bison Red One', Lt George Straub, had an exciting time in claiming one Fw 190 destroyed and another damaged. He fired at one from about a distance of 400 yards, closing on the enemy fighter until it started to smoke and go down in a slow spin. Straub almost ran into the middle of the Focke-Wulf formation before he pulled up and broke away.



Maj Jules Biscayart of the 436th FS claimed two aerial victories over Fw 190s on 28 September 1944 during the very last aerial engagement fought by P-38s assigned to the Eighth Air Force. These were Biscayart's only kills (via Blake)

Fellow 436th FS pilot Lt Donald Dunn went one better than Biscayart during the legendary 28 September clash, downing three Fw 190s. These were also his only combat claims during a tour that ran from May to October 1944 (via Blake)



Groundcrews take a cigarette break beneath a 434th FS P-51D in the late summer sun of 1944. Note that they are sat on pierced-steel planking (Tabatt collection)



Lt Jim Frolking was flying as 'Bison Red Two', and he succeeded in damaging another enemy fighter, as did 'Red Three', Lt Howard Hightower, before the entire flight broke away. Hightower remembers seeing 'a helluva dogfight' taking place.

Lt Gerald Mulvaney was also in on the attack, but his hope of claiming a victory was ruined when, just as he pressed the trigger, another P-38 slid in across his nose and dropped its external fuel tanks – these came very close to hitting him. Mulvaney had mixed emotions when his gun-camera film was subsequently developed back at Wattisham and the offending P-38 showed no signs of damage from friendly fire.

The last recorded mission flown by VIII Fighter Command P-38s took place on 3 October 1944, when 13 436th FS machines escorted B-24s from the 2nd BD to Speyer airfield, in Germany. From this point on the 479th FG's success would depend entirely on the North American P-51 Mustang.

479th FG MUSTANG ACES

Between October and the end of December, 479th pilots quickly improved their proficiency with the P-51D and added much to the USAAF's combat record in the ETO by claiming to have shot down some 50 German aircraft. The first of these victories fell to Lt Thomas Myers of the 436th FS and to Capt Robin Olds – the first of his eight Mustang claims – on 6 October. Olds was restrained in reporting his victory;

'I was flying as 'Newcross Yellow' Leader on an escort mission to Berlin. We were top cover on roving escort, investigating bogies just northwest of Berlin at 30,000 ft, when the rear boxes of bombers were hit by enemy aircraft. On order, we dropped tanks and rushed back to the fight. The enemy aircraft attacked the bombers in waves of eight to ten in flat "Vees" from "six o'clock" slightly high.

'I dove to a point in front of the box of bombers being hit and followed the last wave of Fw 190s that I closed on. They immediately took evasive action, so I switched my attention to a third group and closed in. It is my opinion that this particular German formation was intent on hitting the next box of bombers in line because they were heading right for them, and they showed no signs of split-essing from their initial attack.



Capt Robin Olds' groundcrew pose with their P-51D 44-14426 SCAT #5. Olds scored his first Mustang victory in this aircraft on 6 October 1944 when he claimed an Fw 190 just west of Berlin (Tabatt collection)



'I opened fire at the Fw 190 I had selected within good range, but did not see any hits. I realised then that some of my guns were frozen, so I proceeded to walk the gunsight back and forth across the enemy aircraft. Then I observed strikes and the canopy came off immediately, followed by several other large pieces. The Fw 190 went into a violent skid, giving me a three-quarter beam shot with no deflection. I fired again, observing many hits in and around the cockpit. Then I passed on over the enemy aircraft as it plunged down trailing smoke.'

Recently promoted Maj Art Jeffrey secured his place as a 479th FG ace when he scored his fifth aerial victory on 7 October. He subsequently reported;

'I was leading "Newcross Yellow" Section on an escort mission to Leipzig. As we approached the target area at 30,000 ft, Col Zemke, group leader, called in enemy aircraft approaching the bombers in a gaggle from the north. Some 30+ German fighters hit the box of bombers ahead of us at 27,000 ft before we could reach them.

'After one pass they split-essed down. I picked the nearest Me 109, split-essed down after him, and closed on him from the rear at about 24,000 ft. Evidently sighting me, the German pulled into a sharp right turn, enabling me to get within range and fire a deflection shot. I observed many strikes on the fuselage from the cockpit to the engine.

'Apparently, his engine quit, and the pilot must have also been hit, for the enemy aircraft eased down in an almost gentle glide and I did not see the pilot make any attempt to bail out. I overshot and, coming back in from astern, I opened fire again, getting good strikes. Big pieces, appearing to be the left aileron and part of the wing, flew off, and flames poured out of the engine. The enemy aircraft then rolled gently over onto its back and dived into a cloud bank, the top of which was 1000 ft indicated. Just before it went into the cloud, I passed over within feet, and I could see the pilot slumped way down in the seat looking lifeless.'

435th FS Mustangs close up for the benefit of the camera at the start of an escort mission in the autumn of 1944. P-51D 44-14263 (J2-G) was usually flown by Lt William Barsky, while P-51D 44-14827 (J2-N) was the usual mount of Lt Verne Hooker – this aircraft survived until the war's end. The identity of J2-J remains unknown (Tabatt collection)

Col Zemke, meanwhile, had been having some trouble making the rendezvous with his assigned bomber combat wing, so he decided to lead his portion of the 479th FG to the target at Brux and wait for the bombers there. Flying west of Chemnitz, he observed some fast-moving single-engined aircraft in tight formation about ten miles away.

By the time Zemke and his flight had closed on the bogies at high speed, the still unidentified aircraft were engaging a formation of American bombers. Upon seeing streams of machine gun and cannon fire passing between the bombers and the intruders from the 'seven o'clock' position, Zemke ordered external tanks to be dropped and full power to be applied so that his fighters reached the 'heavies' as expeditiously as possible. However, before he could repel the enemy's attack, he spotted several bombers exploding and falling out of the sky.

The German aircraft, now identified as Bf 109s, rolled over after passing through the bomber formation and broke off to the left. Zemke and his wingman, Lt Norman Benoit, gave chase and quickly pulled into range at about 23,000 ft. Impressing Zemke with his handling of his Bf 109, the German pilot who had become the colonel's target broke to the right as if to get onto the tail of the P-51.

Going around in a grim combat circle, first Zemke would have the advantage, then the German, and then Benoit would adroitly drive the Bf 109 off until the enemy fighter made a move which brought him onto the wingman's tail. Zemke cut him off, at which point the enemy pilot must have decided that he had had enough of this game for he broke away and headed for the cloud deck. Despite an indicated airspeed of between 500-550 mph, Zemke was closing too slowly to get in many shots before his quarry entered cloud cover.

Zemke had reasoned that the Bf 109 pilot would level out before entering the clouds at 1500 ft, at which point the veteran ace would get a fair chance of a killing shot. But that was not necessary because, as Zemke reported later, 'his left wing folded back, hitting the fuselage and tail, causing the entire aircraft to disintegrate. The pieces went straight down. I saw no parachute, and am certain the pilot was killed'.

Zemke and Benoit subsequently had a few inconclusive combats with other Bf 109s, after which they escorted a damaged B-17 that was gradually descending lower into the cloud deck, before finally strafing a train near Oschersleben. They shared credit for the self-destructing Bf 109, which represented the last of Zemke's 17.75 aerial victories.

The 436th FS lost two Mustangs during the course of this mission, with Lt James Frolking (in P-51D 44-14577) being forced to bail out near Scheldt after his fighter was hit by flak. He successfully evaded capture. A short while later Lt Victor Wolski abandoned his fighter (P-51D 44-14553) over the Channel when it suffered engine failure. He was soon recovered by an air-sea rescue launch.

Most of the operations flown during the rest of October were uneventful escort missions. The sky was usually heavily clouded, and Luftwaffe opposition was decidedly on the wane by this stage of the war as its fighter forces re-grouped and VIII Fighter Command pilots became more aggressive. Allied ground forces were rapidly approaching German soil in the west, and the enemy seemed virtually powerless to react to these territorial gains either from the air or on the ground.

Groundcrew from the 434th FS pose with Lt John Tipps' P-51D 44-14311 *The WILDCAT*. This aircraft was lost early on in its career when Tipps' roommate Lt George Gleason was hit by anti-aircraft fire on 19 October 1944 while flying it. He bailed out over Allied territory and hobbled back to Wattisham on crutches. Tipps was both infuriated that his aircraft was lost and delighted that Gleason had survived the incident (Tabatt collection)



Hitler was reportedly told by Reichmarshall Hermann Goring at this time that more Allied bombers were being claimed by flak gunners than by Luftwaffe interceptors. The superb 88 mm anti-aircraft gun was reputedly accurate up to an altitude of 24,000 ft, while the heavier, but less numerous, 125 mm gun could supposedly target bombers cruising at ceilings up to 30,000 ft. By this time the impatient Führer was more interested in his V2 rocket programme that he believed would punish the Allies, rather than in finding an efficient counter to growing air raids on German territory.

Despite a general lack of aerial opposition in October, there were still shocks in store for the 479th FG before the month was out when the group lost two popular leaders in the same mission.

During the afternoon of 30 October, Col Zemke was leading a large formation of 62 P-51s covering bombers withdrawing from an attack on Hamburg when his 'Newcross White' Flight entered a mass of dark cloud at about 27,000 ft. This was due to be the colonel's final mission with the group, for he had been ordered to report to 65th Fighter Wing Headquarters to commence a staff job at month-end. Lt Richard Creighton was Zemke's wingman, and upon his return to Wattisham he wrote;



Lt Dick Creighton's crewchief stands beside 434th FS P-51D 44-15381 *"Super Wabbit"*. Another well used Mustang that survived the war, the fighter was unceremoniously salvaged following VE-Day. Its *"Super Wabbit"* motif was one of three artworks painted by 434th FS Mustang pilot Lt Eugene Sears (Tabatt collection)

'I was flying on Col Zemke's left wing as we entered the overcast at about 27,000-28,000 ft. I was on "C" channel at the time, and did not hear him call a turn to the left. He made a turn to the left into me and appeared to be having trouble. I experienced great difficulty in staying with him. I then realised that I was on my back due to the fact that I was "hanging" by my safety belt and my gyros had tumbled. Col Zemke appeared to be in the same attitude, and immediately following that I lost visual contact with him. We were at about 21,000-22,000 ft when I last saw him.'

Lt Walter Drake was leading the second element, and he reported;

'We saw the front ahead of us and started to climb over it. Then Col Zemke decided to go down and try to go through it or get under it. We started down in about a 20-degree dive and levelled out at around 23,000-24,000 ft. We were within the front by then, and Col Zemke said we would make a 180-degree left turn, at which point he started turning with his wingman. His bank became steeper until both of them went onto their backs. I could tell this because I kept one eye on my artificial horizon, and when we went over it spilled. The last time I saw Col Zemke he was heading down on his back.'

The atmospheric conditions within the clouds were so severe that Zemke's Mustang (P-51D 44-14351) broke up, and it was fortunate for him that his entire seat area was thrown clear of the wreckage. He was able to open his parachute when he freed himself from the seat, and he floated down to the ground and was taken prisoner. Zemke wrote about his final mission in *The Hub – Fighter Leader*;

'After returning from a weekend on leave in London, my bags were packed and made ready for my departure from Wattisham. However, that morning, the 30th, a Field Order came through for an escort for bombers

Groundcrewmen pause for a photograph while servicing P-51D 44-11214 TOMMY TROJAN, assigned to Lt Ronald Maley. This aircraft was one of four Mustangs lost by the 479th FG on 5 December 1944, Maley falling victim to flak near Scharfenberg. He spent the rest of the war as a PoW (Tabatt collection)



hitting oil targets in north central Germany. The forecast was good, with unlimited visibility at altitude and from ten to fifteen miles at ground level. A cold front had passed through, and was scheduled to be over Poland before the mission was launched. One last show.

'I would lead A group, with the 434th FS up front. The day didn't look too bad as we took off, but once we headed out over the sea cloud started to build up ahead. By the time we had identified the wing of B-24s we were to escort, great stacks of cumulus rose three to four miles high from the ground. Every now and then the Liberators would disappear from view, and for safety we had to dodge around or over the mass of clouds. Contrails persisted and the vapours turned to rime ice as we cut through. About 1315 hrs a great front towered up ahead. I didn't like the look of those white billows, but it was so high we had little choice other than to plunge through if we were not to lose the bombers.

'An order to tighten the flight formations was given. As soon as my Mustang entered the mists it began to bounce like a cork. The turbulence was violent. "Highway" to "Newcross" aircraft. "Make a 180". We had to get out, fast. Starting into the turn, I suddenly found my aircraft tossed into a violent spin. Automatically, my left hand brought the throttle back as the spin and airspeed built up. Recovery from a spin was not difficult – the joystick moved forward, and with a rapid kick of the rudder in the direction of the rotation, the P-51 responded like the little champion she was. The spin stopped but the altimeter unwound at an alarming rate. Meanwhile, the airspeed was increasing in leaps and bounds. By now the gauges showed that the Mustang had stabilised, but was heading straight down enshrouded in the mist. I began to gradually pull back on the stick.

'What happened next was seemingly an instantaneous sequence of events. There was a resounding crash, a punishing blow to my right shoulder and head, a rushing blast of air all around me, and my flying helmet, oxygen mask and goggles ripped from my face. The aircraft had gone, but here was I still strapped in the cockpit seat! Icy air banished the initial shock to my system. No sense of falling – it was as if I was suspended in a misty void. But the most precarious human possession, life, took command with clear, instant action – fingers unlatched the safety belt and feet kicked me free of the seat.

'There was no pondering how far the ground lay below. That same life stream was ahead of reason, and had an aching right hand towards the parachute D-ring on my chest, and the left hand there to grasp when the right didn't make it. A flip and a violent jolt. Momentarily dazed, I slumped in the harness, then realised the 'chute had opened. Now a feeling of blessed relief flooded through me. I didn't consciously think I had just cheated death.'

But the demise of Zemke and his Mustang was not the end of the incident for the 479th. Lt Col James Herren (in P-51D 44-14396) was leading 'Newcross Red' Flight behind Zemke's formation, and he had tried to follow when 'White' Flight attempted to climb over the front. Lt Gail Jacobson was in 'Red Four' position when he observed Herren attempting to stay with Zemke, who was about 350 yards ahead of him. Jacobson last saw Herren diving almost straight down. The next day German forces recovered the body of Lt Col Herren at Katensen/Celle and buried him in a local cemetery in Bergen.

Lt Col James Herren, the popular 434th FS CO, was lost in this P-51D (44-14396) on 30 October 1944 – the same day that another popular leader, 479th FG CO Col Hubert Zemke, took to his parachute when his Mustang broke up in a ferocious weather front. Herren perished but Zemke survived to be taken prisoner (*Blake*)



Lt Douglas Holmes (in P-51D 44-14627) was also in the flight, and he too was posted missing when the rest of the group returned to base – some sources claim he collided with Herren. He was later listed as a PoW. Finally, squadronmate Lt Douglas Thomas (in P-51D 44-14225) perished when his aircraft crashed upon his return to Wattisham.

30 October 1944 had seen the group suffer its worst losses for four months, with four pilots and aircraft down and numerous others so badly damaged by the effects of the rough weather that they had to be written off. It seemed that what the enemy could not do to defeat the 479th FG was accomplished by the weather.

One slightly ironic event followed Zemke's loss. He had succeeded Lt Col Kyle Riddle in August when the latter had been shot down. When Riddle managed to evade capture and returned to the UK in late September, he was able to work his way back into the executive commander's job at the 479th, and he duly assumed command again when Zemke failed to return on 30 October. Upon his repatriation, Zemke joked that Riddle had sawn through the wing of his P-51 so as to reclaim his old job!

November ushered in a period of good hunting for the fighter pilots of VIII Fighter Command. There had been occasional high-scoring days since the Normandy invasion, but the final two months of 1944 saw fighter groups from VIII Fighter Command routinely claiming aerial victories. The events of 2 November offer a good example, with 130+ confirmed claims being filed. The 20th and 352nd FGs alone were granted more than 60 confirmations between them. But the 479th was able to add only two kills to its tally, one of which fell to Maj Arthur Jeffrey for his sixth victory.



Lt Col Sid Woods had led the entire group while Jeffrey and the 434th FS (which he had been made CO of just the previous day) covered B-17s withdrawing from the target at Merseburg. Enemy aircraft were sighted southwest of Leipzig, so Jeffrey and his wingman dropped down from 30,000 ft to 25,000 ft. They quickly became separated from the rest of the squadron, but Jeffrey continued the chase, as he subsequently reported;

'I observed one enemy aircraft coming down in a dive towards the south. I turned into him, and as he passed I identified him as an Me 109. He did not make any attempt to fire. I immediately took up pursuit and caught him at approximately 10,000 ft. Opening fire, I observed strikes on the left wing and fuselage. I overshot and pulled up, before coming down on him again. I opened fire once more, and had closed to 200 yards from dead astern when the enemy aircraft suddenly started down in a spiral to the right, out of control – the spiral was almost a spin. The enemy aircraft did about three complete turns from 5000 ft and crashed into the ground. I did not see the pilot bail out, and believe that he must have been hit, as all my strikes seemed to be converging on the cockpit and fuselage.'

Lt John Donnell of the 434th also chased a Bf 109 down through the clouds before finally despatching it at almost ground level. He then stayed with the bombers until a mechanical problem forced him to land on the Continent, delaying his report until his return to Wattisham.

OPERATIONAL CASUALTIES

The group suffered yet more losses in which the enemy played no direct part on 6 and 8 November. On the former date, 436th FS pilot Lt Marion Steele (in P-51D 44-11201) was flying over the North Sea during an escort mission when his fighter suffered mechanical failure. He perished in the subsequent crash. Two days later, 435th pilots Lt Heinz Detlefson (in P-51D 44-14294) and Lt Thomas V Smith (in P-51D 44-14589) collided near Minden. The latter took to his parachute and became a PoW, but Detlefson, who had been with the 479th since its arrival in the UK, was killed.

Lt Bill Hehn's 434th FS P-51D 44-14596 *Rumboogie JR.* is seen taxiing out at the start of yet another long range escort mission. This aircraft was downed by flak near Neuweid on 23 December 1944, its pilot Lt Tom Neely, being captured (*Tabatt collection*)

Two of *My Janet's* groundcrew pose proudly with their charge. This P-51D (44-14645) was operated by the 434th FS, prior to it being transferred to the 436th (*Tabatt collection*)





Lt Verne Hooker's 435th FS P-51D 44-14827 departs Wattisham on a long-range mission with full external tanks (Tabatt collection)

Lt George Hendrix poses for a portrait towards the end of his tour, which ran from the beginning of the 479th FG's operations in May 1944 until his repatriation six months later. He is leaning on his assigned Mustang, the serial of which remains unknown (Tabatt collection)



On a more positive note, the group claimed another confirmed victory during a penetration and withdrawal escort mission on 26 November. Again, VIII Fighter Command units were credited with 100+ enemy interceptors destroyed, but the 479th FG was unable to find any targets despite its pursuit of several reported bogies. The only solid hostile aircraft observation was that made by Col Riddle, who was leading the 435th FS over airfields near the city of Rheine.

Riddle spotted a lone Fw 190 at about 3000 ft over the city's canal, but Lt Theo Sowerby was quicker off the mark and went into a wild turning fight with the enemy pilot. After taking several bursts from Sowerby's guns, the Focke-Wulf exploded. Sowerby took pictures of the wreckage and Lt Billy Means came up from behind to confirm the claim visually.

The next day's strafing mission drew the Luftwaffe up, thus enabling VIII Fighter Command to make many further claims, two of which were credited to the 479th FG. Lt Lewis Peterson of 435th FS got an Fw 190 northeast of Dummer Lake, while Lt Hans Grasshoff of the 436th FS claimed another to score his only aerial victory in the Mustang. His report describes the action, which began at 25,000 ft in the Osnabruck area;

'Two flights of Fw 190s, one of four and one of five, approached us at 25,000 ft. We climbed towards them head-on. The four-ship flight split-essed and the five-ship flight drove on. As we turned to chase the latter, they split-essed too. I followed one and shot at it during the dive. I observed hits on my second burst and saw the pilot bail out at approximately 19,000 ft.'

German records state that five pilots from JG 26 were reported killed or wounded in the Osnabruck area. One Fw 190A-8 pilot of I./JG 26 took to his parachute, and he may have been the individual shot down by Grasshoff.

There were more victories on 5 December, when VIII Fighter Command's tally exceeded 100 confirmed claims once more. The 479th FG contributed 14 of these victories, half of which were credited to the 434th FS. The group had put up 49 P-51s in two sub-groups, A group being led by Riddle and B group by 436th FS CO Maj John Sullivan. The target was marshalling yards in Berlin, and the 479th was protecting its bomber charges over Dummer Lake a few minutes before 1000 hrs when they spotted enemy fighters.

Maj Jeffrey duly fought one of his greatest engagements of the war, claiming three Fw 190s destroyed and a fourth damaged, as he described in his official report;

'I was leading "Newcross" Squadron's Section A on an escort mission to the Berlin area. I was at about 26,000 ft in the vicinity of Neuruppin, which is ten miles northwest of Berlin. I sighted two formations of enemy aircraft on a course of 330 degrees approximately 2000 ft below us, heading directly for the bomber formation. I gave the order to drop belly tanks and led "White" Section (nine P-51s) to attack in a diving left turn.

'I was closing on the larger formation of about 40+ Fw 190s when my gunsight bulb went out. I dove right on through the smaller formation of approximately 15 Me 109s, which was slightly above and to the right rear of the big gaggle. The '109s split up every which way, with most of them hitting the deck.

'I finally got my gunsight back in operation and drove up the rear of the '190 formation, closing on one to the left rear of the gaggle. I opened fire at 350 yards from dead astern, slightly high to low, and closed to about 100 yards, observing strikes on the fuselage and belly tank. The latter exploded and then the whole aircraft burst into flames and rolled over. I last observed him about 1000 ft below me, spinning down out of control. During this attack, I could tell that all my guns were not firing. I discovered later that two guns had indeed frozen.

'I then moved over to the right, behind another Fw 190, and attacked it from dead astern. Opening fire at about 250 yards, I closed to 50 yards, observing strikes all over his fuselage. The German started weaving slightly, but not violently. Finally, I overshot and pulled up over him to the right, whereupon I observed flames pouring out of his engine. The whole canopy and fuselage appeared to be blackened and seared. I repositioned for another pass, but then saw the '190 go over in a spiral, belching flames and smoke, so I broke off to look for some more.

'Not immediately sighting any enemy aircraft at my level, I split-essed to around 4000 ft, losing Lt Gail Jacobson, my wingman, while doing so. Almost at once I picked up two Fw 190s stooging around rather aimlessly, evidently trying to find a hole in the overcast, the top of which was at approximately 3000 ft. I drove up behind the rearmost one and, in a fairly



434th FS CO Maj Art Jeffrey took his tally to nine confirmed victories when he downed three Fw 190s on 5 December 1944. By the end of the month he had increased his score to 13 aerial victories, thus making him the 479th FG's leading ace. He is seen here posing with his P-51D 44-14423, in which he claimed five kills (including the three Focke-Wulfs on 5 December) (Tabatt collection)

Maj Jeffrey pilots P-51D 44-14423 during a training flight in late 1944. He replaced this machine with identically marked P-51K 44-11674 in early 1945 (Tabatt collection)



tight turn to the left, opened fire at about 200 yards, closing to less than 100 yards. While I was firing, I ran out of ammunition on the remaining right-side guns, so I had to skid to correct my fire, which was coming from the left-side guns only. I observed a number of strikes, and flames began to pour out of the aircraft. The '190 rolled over and spun, flaming into the undercast out of control.'

Jeffrey fired his remaining ammunition at a fourth Focke-Wulf fighter, and saw strikes before his guns fell silent. The German pilot threw his machine around in a series of frantic manoeuvres aimed at shaking off his pursuer, but Jeffrey stuck to his tail in the hope of frightening his clearly rattled opponent into abandoning his aircraft. However, the *Jagdflieger* finally made good his escape by flying into a bank of cloud.

Jacobson had witnessed the first victory claimed by Jeffrey, prior to the two of them becoming separated. He had in turn managed to down two Fw 190s himself.

LOW-LEVEL VICTORY

One of the P-51's great strengths was its ability to adjust quickly to various flight regimes and altitudes. Lt Harold Mathews of the 434th FS claimed an Fw 190 during the 5 December engagement, and his combat report revealed how the fighter's versatility could be put to good use;

'I was flying "Newcross Yellow Three" in Section A at 1040 hrs when group leader "Highway" (Col Riddle) called in bandits in the Neuruppin area, northwest of Berlin. Our squadron, led by Maj Jeffrey, drove in to investigate. We found a gaggle of 40+ Fw 190s approximately 2000 ft below us, heading in a northwesterly direction. "White" and "Red" Flights made the bounce from the rear.

'The enemy aircraft broke into two bunches, one turning left and the other right. "Newcross Yellow" started after the right bunch, but these were bounced by another flight before we got to them. One Fw 190 broke from the formation in a 180-degree turn. I called, split-essed and started after him. I found I had only two guns on the right working, and in the high speed dive could not bring them to bear on him.

'We dove from 22,000 ft through a number of cloud layers, attaining an indicated speed of 475 mph by the time we hit 8000 ft. We were diving in a 60-degree angle. At 5000 ft there was another cloud deck through which

the '190 split-essed, taking a steeper angle of dive. I executed a sharp right diving turn and followed him through, easing up in the dive as my ship was porpoising badly. We came out of this layer of clouds at around 500 ft above the ground. The Fw 190 was apparently out of control due to the tremendous speed, and it crashed straight in, causing smoke and debris to rise into the cloud deck. My windshield was badly iced after diving through the cloud decks.'

Aside from Jeffrey and Jacobson, the only other pilot to claim more

than a solitary kill was future ace Lt Richard Candelaria of the 435th FS. He had joined the unit when it transitioned to P-51s in September 1944, and the two Fw 190s he destroyed northwest of Berlin were the first of six aerial successes that would ultimately make him the squadron's sole non-strafting ace. The 435th would claim five kills in total during this mission.

The 436th FS got just one victory – an Fw 190 shared between Lts Thomas Myers and Peter Vasseur. The latter pilot had become separated from his flight during the engagement, and prudently decided to return home rather than remain on his own in enemy skies. At noon, as he headed west past Osnabruck, Vasseur encountered a Me 262 jet fighter emerging from cloud cover at an altitude of 16,000 ft. An addendum to the squadron's mission report describes this encounter;

'Our ship was returning home alone at 20,000 ft. The jet apparently had very little power on as our P-51 gained on him, indicating 450 mph. The jet took evasive action, during which time several hits were observed. Our aircraft turned right, after which the jet dove into a cloud bank and was lost to sight. Being alone, our aircraft did not pursue.

The successes enjoyed by the group on 5 December came at a price, however, for the 479th lost four Mustangs during the course of the mission. The first of these was the victim of yet another mid-air collision, with 436th FS pilot Lt Charles Kreger and his wingman, Lt Barrett Eskell (in 44-14517) hitting each other deep over enemy territory. Kreger filed the following report after landing his crippled Mustang in friendly territory;

'I was "Bison Red 3" and 2Lt Barrett B Eskell was "Red 4". We were flying east near Stendel. I was to the right of my flight leader, 1Lt Thomas E Myers, at 27,000 ft. My flight leader made a 90-degree turn towards me and directly into the sun. I went down under him, started to turn and came up on the other side, looking directly into the sun to see my flight leader, when I felt a sharp jolt. I looked down and saw another aeroplane immediately under me. I stalled, recovered, looked up to my right and saw my wingman going down with his left wing crumpled. I stalled and recovered again. He seemed to be in a steep slip to the right.

'My aircraft was streaming gas, and as I did not know the extent of my own damage, I was not able to observe whether or not a 'chute emerged from the damaged aircraft. Both of my belly tanks had burst, so I dropped them, called "Snow White" and came home. In my opinion, my wingman lost me in the sun and flew into me.'

Lt Eskell abandoned his stricken Mustang and was taken prisoner.

Lt Ronald Maley (in P-51D 44-11214) of the 434th FS fell victim to flak near Scharfenburg and he too was made a PoW. His squadronmate Lt Walter Neumann (in P-51D 44-14592) was not so lucky, however, as he was killed when his Mustang was bounced by a German fighter over



434th FS P-51D 44-14592 *Buzzin' Texan* was usually flown by Lt Walter A Neumann (centre). The fighter is seen here whilst having its guns calibrated. Neumann was shot down and killed in this aircraft when he was bounced by a German fighter over Neuruppin on 5 December 1944 (Tabatt collection)

Lt H E Mathews (second from right) was the usual pilot of this 434th FS P-51D 44-14845 *Tenacious Torchy*. He served with the group from June 1944 through to war's end, being credited with one aerial (in the P-51) and two strafing (in the P-38) victories (Tabatt collection)





Two pilots, one of whom is probably Lt Ronald Maley, stand in front of P-51D 44-11214 **TOMMY TROJAN**, named after the 'Trojan' nickname of Maley's alma mater, the University of Southern California (Tabatt collection)

435th FS P-51D 44-14354 **V FOR 'VAL'** was the usual mount of Capt Phil Gossard. He was an original member of the squadron when it entered combat, and he flew this Mustang from September 1944 until it was damaged in a ground loop at Wattisham on 2 December 1944 (Tabatt collection)



Neuruppin and shot down. Finally, 436th FS CO Maj John Sullivan (flying ex-435th FS P-51D 44-14636) perished when his aircraft crashed into the North Sea after suffering mechanical failure.

Escort missions continued for the group's pilots over the next few days, although increasingly bad weather saw numerous flights aborted or cancelled altogether. The deteriorating atmospheric conditions may have played a part in at least two of the four fatal crashes that saw three pilots from the 435th FS and one from the 434th FS killed between 10 and 13 December. Two of the fighters lost were war-weary P-51Bs that were being used by novice pilots to gain operational experience during training hops prior to them being declared combat capable.

Resistance from German interceptors was weakening to the point that only the most persistent American fighter pilots could now find good hunting. Another reason for the diminished German reaction in the air was the support that Hitler demanded of the Luftwaffe for the Wehrmacht's surprise counterattack in the Ardennes area of Belgium. Now that the worsening weather was predicted to favour the German assault on the extended and unseasoned American troops holding the line in Belgium and Luxembourg, the last great Wehrmacht offensive of World War 2 was unleashed on 16 December 1944 under the cover of heavily overcast skies that promised freedom from observation, as well as immunity from the ever present, and deadly, Allied fighter-bombers.

In a break from the routine that had seen the group covering bombers attacking rail transportation targets during the first three weeks of December, the 479th FG was assigned another MEW sweep similar to the one that had presented the group with its successful haul of aerial victories on 26 September. Mission 213, flown on 23 December, saw a force of 64 Mustangs sent into Germany to hunt for enemy aircraft, guided by MEW headings. The group history recorded the ensuing engagement succinctly;

'While the 435th cruised to the Liege area to investigate bogies, which turned out to be "Spits", the 434th and 436th discovered some 20 Fw 190s and Me 109s southeast of Bonn, heading for the Ardennes front. The group immediately went into the attack, and when the final score was

tallied it was 12-0-1 for one loss. The latter was Lt Tom D Neely of the 434th FS, who chased an Fw 190 down to 2000 ft and received multiple flak hits over the town of Westerburg, forcing him to belly-in, apparently successfully. The big battle took place from 15,000 ft down to the deck, with most of it down low.'

Lt Neely (in P-51D 44-14596) managed to escape from the wreckage of his crashed Mustang, but he was quickly taken prisoner. Members of his 'Newcross Purple' Flight who were behind him witnessed the pilot of the Fw 190 that he had been chasing bail out of the burning fighter just moments after Neely was hit by flak. And members of 'Newcross Blue' Flight that were covering 'Newcross Purple' Flight confirmed that they had seen Neely down another Fw 190 shortly before he had chased the aircraft over Westerburg.

Once again, the day's high scorer was Maj Art Jeffrey, who accounted for three Bf 109s when he led 'White' Section down to attack bogies southeast of Bonn. Leading the group that day, he called in the enemy fighters below him just prior to split-essing into the gaggle. The glare of the sun delayed their identification until Jeffrey was at relatively close range, and he saw his first target crash into the ground shortly after he had opened fire.

The ace then turned his attention to another Bf 109 that was trying to evade pursuit, and he fired from about 300 yards until the trapped fighter crashed into the trees below. Another Bf 109 was attacked from a range of 500 yards, closing to 150 yards, and it burst into flames. The German pilot was able to take to his parachute just before his aircraft crashed.

Fellow 434th FS ace Lt George Gleason claimed two Fw 190s destroyed, and he was pouring fire into a third when his guns jammed, thus denying him a further triple victory. Lt Gail Jacobson added an Fw 190 to the 434th tally by following it down to about 1000 ft. Using his computing K-14 gunsight to good advantage, he saw strikes all over his target's canopy and wings, before the fighter snap rolled and exploded when it hit the ground.

Capt Edwin Lewin of the 436th FS was flying as 'Bison Yellow One' when he saw a wild dogfight involving P-47s, Fw 190s and Bf 109s. 'Bison Purple

Lt Gail Jacobson of the 434th FS flew this P-51D (44-15380) until it too was damaged in a landing accident on 25 December 1944. Subsequently repaired, the fighter remained with the group through to VE-Day (Tabatt collection)





The port side of P-51D 44-15380 *Burn'n Bernie*, seen on the wing on the previous page (Tabatt collection)

Two', flying in the trailing flight, called for a right break, which Lewin made – he dropped his external tanks at the same time. Moments later he saw the reason for the call when a Bf 109 streaked by with a P-47 following in its wake at some distance. The Thunderbolt was being outrun by the nimble German fighter, but Lewin had an altitude advantage, so he took up the pursuit. Quickly closing on the diving enemy fighter, he actually over-shot it and had to manoeuvre tightly to get back on its tail.

Again, using the K-14 gunsight, Lewin began firing from 500 yards down to 150 yards, observing debris and smoke coming from his target before overshooting once again. Keeping the Bf 109 in sight while it spun down, Lewin watched it belly-in, hit a stone wall and explode. Capt Joseph Struby, who was leading 'Bison Purple' Flight, observed Lewin's victory just moments before he succeeded in destroying an Fw 190.

Capt Carl Ernst led 'Bison Yellow' Flight into the whirlwind of action, and he hit a Bf 109 hard enough to force its pilot to abandon his blazing machine. Capt Andre Huycke, flying as 'Bison White Three', with Lt Hans Grasshoff as his wingman, saw a P-47 from the 56th FG crash after it was abandoned in the midst of the engagement – the latter group lost three aircraft to enemy fighters during the dogfight. Huycke set off after the victorious Fw 190 pilot and shot him down, watched by Grasshoff.

It had been a truly wild clash, and one that completely vindicated the claim of a twelve-to-one victory margin for the pilots of the 479th FG. German records identified the Luftwaffe units engaged by the group as JGs 11, 26 and 27, which lost 20+ aircraft between them in determined attacks on the bombers. Oberst Gunther Specht's JG 11 had tried its hardest to get at the bombers, but his pilots were frustrated by the



Maj Jules Biscayart had a successful tour of duty with the 436th FS, leading the unit between 5 and 31 December 1944, after which he returned to the US (via Steve Blake)

protective escort provided largely by the 479th. Art Jeffrey apparently accounted for all three Bf 109G-14s lost by II./JG 11, while four Fw 190s from JG 26 were claimed by the 436th FS.

A lone Fw 190 was credited to Lt Nelson Butler on Christmas Eve, but not before the German pilot had claimed at least one of three B-17s shot down near Liege. When Col Riddle and Lt Clark Hoffman attempted to intercept another Focke-Wulf fighter in the same area, it crashed before either American pilot could claim a hit.

Wattisham-based Mustang pilots had made 30+ claims for aerial victories since the P-51's entry into service in September. These successes had come at a high price, however, for 23 pilots had been lost to all causes (including the four downed by bad weather on 30 October) during this period. On a more optimistic note, better results would come, starting with 15 aerial victories on Christmas Day alone.

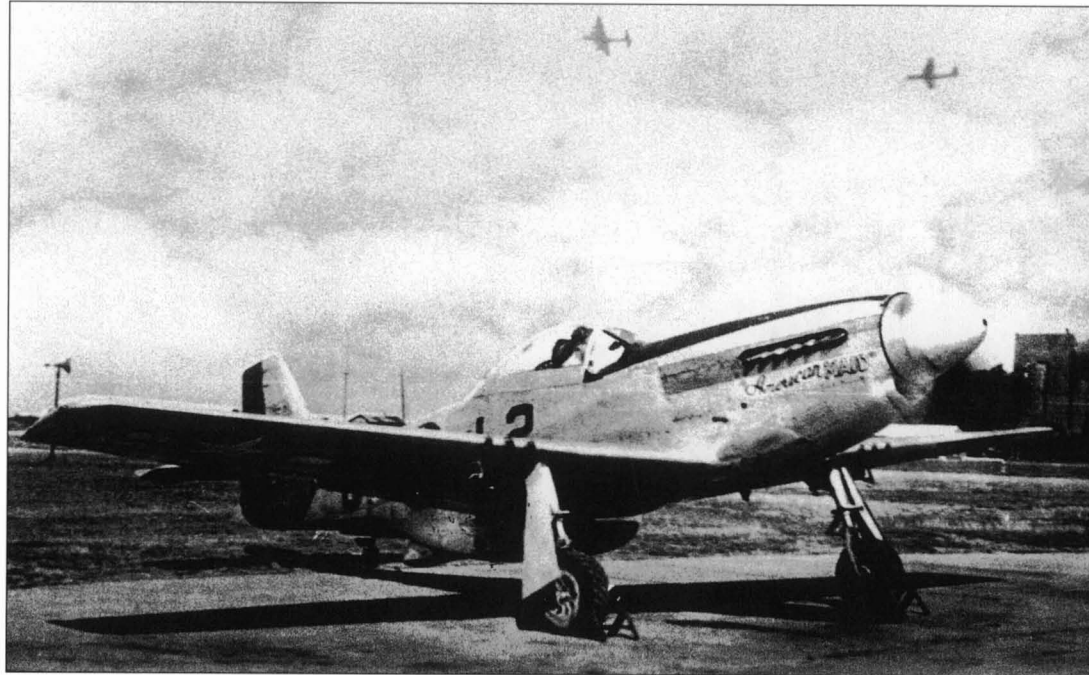
Although freezing fog still covered much of western Europe on 25 December, hampering efforts by the USAAF and RAF to undertake tactical operations in support of beleaguered Allied troops in the Ardennes, the 479th FG (along with the 356th FG) successfully escorted B-24s from the 2nd BD to the marshalling yards at Kassel. The sky was crystal clear when it encountered a large force of Fw 190s and Bf 109s southwest of Bonn.

The 434th's Lt George Gleason emerged from the engagement as the group's top scorer on the day, accounting for three Fw 190s. He was

The pilots' roster for the 434th FS at the end of 1944. Although this unit easily outscored both the 435th and 436th FSs in aerial and strafing victories, the 434th also suffered appreciably higher losses – 42 pilots killed or missing in action, compared to 25 for the 436th and 23 for the 435th (three HQ flight pilots were also lost) (Purdy)



What appears to be an RAF aircraft tows an Airspeed Horsa glider in skies over Wattisham as Lt Eugene Sears runs up the engine of his P-51D 44-15317 "American MAID". Sears was another of the original group of Mustang pilots who began flying with the 434th FS in September 1944 (Tabatt collection)



leading 'Newcross Red' Flight when he sighted a gaggle of enemy fighters trying to gain altitude below him. Fortunately, Gleason spotted a second group of about 20 Fw 190s diving at the P-51s out of the sun from about 32,000 ft. Calling the fighters out over the radio, he then broke directly into them. A savage circular battle ensued, with Gleason's pilots unable to latch onto the tails of the enemy fighters without in turn being attacked by others. Finally, Gleason was able to line up behind an Fw 190 and hit its cockpit and wings with a sustained burst of fire. Pieces began to fly off, including the canopy, and Gleason watched the fighter roll over and fall away in flames without the pilot being able to escape.

Another Fw 190 had just shot down a P-51 from the 434th when Gleason exacted instant retribution by following it into a tight turn and firing a long burst at the Focke-Wulf's cockpit and left wing. The stricken aircraft snapped into a flaming spin from which the German pilot bailed out at about 5000 ft. Gleason's third victory came when he cut in behind yet another Fw 190 that was being chased by P-51s. He opened fire and continued shooting until the Focke-Wulf began trailing black smoke and the pilot abandoned his doomed machine.

Maj Art Jeffrey added a Bf 109 to the group's tally when he saw a formation of about 20 enemy fighters coming down to the left of the 434th FS. He ordered external tanks to be dropped, but lost some advantage when one of his own briefly hung up. Within seconds he was able to catch two Bf 109s diving for the ground. One of the Messerschmitt pilots had apparently exceeded his aircraft's stress limits in the dive because the fighter broke up as Jeffrey closed on it.

Concentrating on the one remaining Bf 109, which was now taking desperate evasive action, Jeffrey held his fire until he had closed to within 400 yards. Hitting the fighter with a series of accurate bursts, the Messerschmitt began smoking and then its canopy flew off and the pilot bailed out.

Fellow 434th FS pilots Lts Arnold Holding, Phillip Brown, John Murr and Richard Creighton each claimed Fw 190s, while Lt Eugene Sears got a Bf 109. Lts Norman Benoit and Theodore Sowerby added a Bf 109 and an Fw 190 for the 435th FS, and Capt John Harrell also got a Bf 109 and Lt Richard Spencer two Fw 190s for the 436th FS.

But there was a price to be paid for all this success. The 479th FG lost no fewer than four pilots to the particularly aggressive German pilots in the motley formations that the group had encountered. Three were from the 434th FS – Capt Jim Hollingsworth (in P-51D 44-14892) and Lts James Bouchier, Wendell Marlowe (in P-51D 44-15325) and Edward Hurtig (in P-51D 44-14416) – which had been bounced at the very start of the engagement. 436th FS pilot Lt Douglas Red (in P-51D 44-14559) was also posted missing once the mission had been completed.

Bouchier was returning to base on his own when he happened to join up with renowned 352nd FG Mustang ace Maj George Preddy. A short while later they were targeted by trigger happy American anti-aircraft gunners and shot down behind Allied lines. Bouchier escaped unscathed, but Preddy was not so lucky. He perished attempting to crash-land his P-51.

Lts Marlowe, Hurtig and Red were eventually listed as killed in action, and Jim Hollingsworth had a harrowing experience before ultimately being captured. He submitted the following combat report upon his return to Wattisham on 13 June 1945;

'I was leading "Newcross Yellow" Section on an escort mission. At 27,000 ft in the vicinity of Bonn we encountered 20+ Me 109s, with about that many more Fw 190s in two gaggles. The Me 109s were a little above us and were making a 180-degree turn as I took my section up in a climbing left turn into the sun. As we got into position I tried an 800-yard shot at one of the last enemy aircraft in the formation, ranging with the K-14 sight. I fired a short burst, getting strikes, then closed up to point-



Lt Wendell Marlowe of the 434th FS stands beside his P-51D 44-14288 *PERIGRINE JR.* prior to it being written off on the last day of October 1944. Apparently, Marlowe almost literally flew the wings off the aircraft during the storm-plagued 30 October mission, and it was later salvaged. Marlowe was killed in action on 25 December 1944 when his P-51D 44-15325 was shot down near Bonn by a German fighter (Tabatt collection)

blank range and gave a long burst. The Me 109 took most of my strikes on the fuselage and left wing and then burst into flame, most of the fire coming from the left wing root and cowl. The aircraft rolled over and went into a violent spin. I watched him snap around four or five times, with no apparent attempt at recovery, and then went after another Me 109.

'This second Jerry was in a turn to the left, and I got several hits as it slowed down and rolled out of the turn. Just as I rolled out behind him, someone yelled over the RT, "There is one on your tail, Holly!" At that instant 0.30-cal slugs hit the canopy and a 20 mm round exploded in the right wing. Then came a crash that threw me forward in the cockpit and sent my P-51 into a very tight spin to the right. After much struggling, I managed to get out, and my parachute opened safely. As I floated down, I saw a dark coloured parachute about a half-mile away, which I assumed was the pilot of the Me 109 I had shot down. I was taken prisoner about three minutes after I hit the ground.'

Following the excitement of Christmas Day, the last week of 1944 was something of an anticlimax for the 479th FG. The group flew a series of routine missions, ending with an A and B group escort of B-24s to rail targets in Koblenz on 28 December. Some 52 Mustangs were despatched from Wattisham to protect the bombers in a mission that lasted from 1000 hrs to 1345 hrs. After that, the old year was history and the New Year of 1945 was celebrated in typical fighter pilot fashion.

The number of confirmed claims credited to the group now exceeded 120, with 69 enemy aircraft having been downed by P-51s and 52 by P-38s. With an additional 100+ German aeroplanes destroyed on the ground, the group had achieved an impressive record in a short period of time. On the debit side, however, the 479th had lost 43 P-38s and 28 P-51s to all causes.

The final four months of the war would present further opportunities for the group to add additional lustre to its already illustrious record.

Newly arrived pilot Lt Charles F Schoen Jr was at the controls of P-51D 44-14583 *Dearest Mine* when it was damaged in a minor taxiing accident on 29 December 1944. He was later killed when this aircraft was hit by flak near Reichenaschen on 28 February 1945 (Tabatt collection)



VICTORY

The 479th FG began 1945 with yet another bomber escort mission. On the morning of 1 January, 50 P-51s took off to cover 292 B-17s from the 1st Air Division (all bomb divisions were redesignated as air divisions on 1 January) that were targeting marshalling yards at Kassel. A solitary Fw 190 was claimed destroyed over Nienburg, this being shared between Col Riddle and Lt Clifford Bowers of the 434th FS. Lt Robert Bromschwig of the latter unit managed to damage a second Focke-Wulf.

The group history described a mission flown on the 13th as a 'minimum effort', Capt Duffie leading a single formation of 38 Mustangs from the 436th FS as escorts for 86 B-24s from the 2nd AD that were sent to knock out a railway bridge at Worms. The weather was clear and the escorting pilots could see at least one direct hit on the bridge, with others clustering around the approaches to the target. The weather deteriorated on the way back, however, and Flt Off Raymond King (in P-51D 44-14754) suffered engine failure just short of the Essex coast. He was able to ditch into the sea off Clacton, and although King was plucked alive from the freezing cold water he did not regain consciousness.

The following day, 435th FS CO Maj Herbert Jordan was credited with the group's only kill (a Bf 109) on this date northwest of Wesel. Ironically, although the 479th FG claimed just one victory, 14 January represented something of a high water mark for claims in the ETO, with Eighth Air Force units (both fighter and bomber) being credited with some 170 enemy aircraft confirmed destroyed in the air and on the ground.

Lt Bob Bromschwig's P-51D 44-15381 *Kraut Knocker* of the 434th FS is pictured here before its taxiing accident on 3 January 1945 (Tabatt collection)





Maj Art Jeffrey's P-51D *Boomerang JR.* was apparently re-coded from L2-O to L2-L after the former received his P-51K. The early older D-model Mustang was assigned to Lt Richard Creighton after Jeffrey assumed command of the 434th FS. It was later passed on to Robert Bromschwig, and damaged in a landing accident on 3 January 1945 (Tabatt collection)

Throughout this period, the 479th mainly flew routine escort and area patrol missions of bomber routes. The North Atlantic winter weather became particularly disagreeable during January 1945, with fronts that seemed to appear from nowhere rolling in from the west and stretching from the surface of the North Sea up to the P-51's ceiling limit at around 40,000 ft. There were few contacts with enemy aircraft, although two returning pilots did manage to descend to ground level and claimed to have destroyed four locomotives.

On the 21st, two flights from the 435th FS strafed Leipzig airfield and claimed a Ju 88 and a Ju 52/3m destroyed, together with an Me 262, another Ju 88 and a second Ju 52/3m damaged. The group's fortunes would improve significantly in February.

The weather continued to be disagreeable, however, and the only missions flown by the 479th involved small flights of P-51s sent aloft to escort Photo Reconnaissance Unit (PRU) F-5 Lightnings and F-6 Mustangs. These fast-flying aircraft made only the briefest penetrations of enemy airspace, presenting 479th pilots with little opportunity for aerial engagements.

The group finally encountered enemy fighters once again on 9 February, when the weather cleared sufficiently enough to allow 268 B-24s from the 2nd AD to attack the marshalling yards at Magdeburg. All three Wattisham-based squadrons were able to provide penetration and withdrawal cover for the bombers, as well as escorting a PRU mission to Zwolle, in Holland.

Having covered the B-24s on both their bomb run and withdrawal, the 479th spotted a mixed formation of about 15 Bf 109s and Fw 190s between Magdeburg and Dessau. Newly promoted Maj Robin Olds, who was leading B group of the 479th, led his flights into the attack as soon as he had identified a gaggle of Bf 109s amid the cirrus clouds at about



Most of the 434th's pilots are pictured in front of Lt Richard Lunstrum's P-51D 44-14381 *SATAN'S AGENT* in early January 1945. Art Jeffrey and Robin Olds are standing side-by-side directly under the aircraft's name on its nose (Tabatt collection)

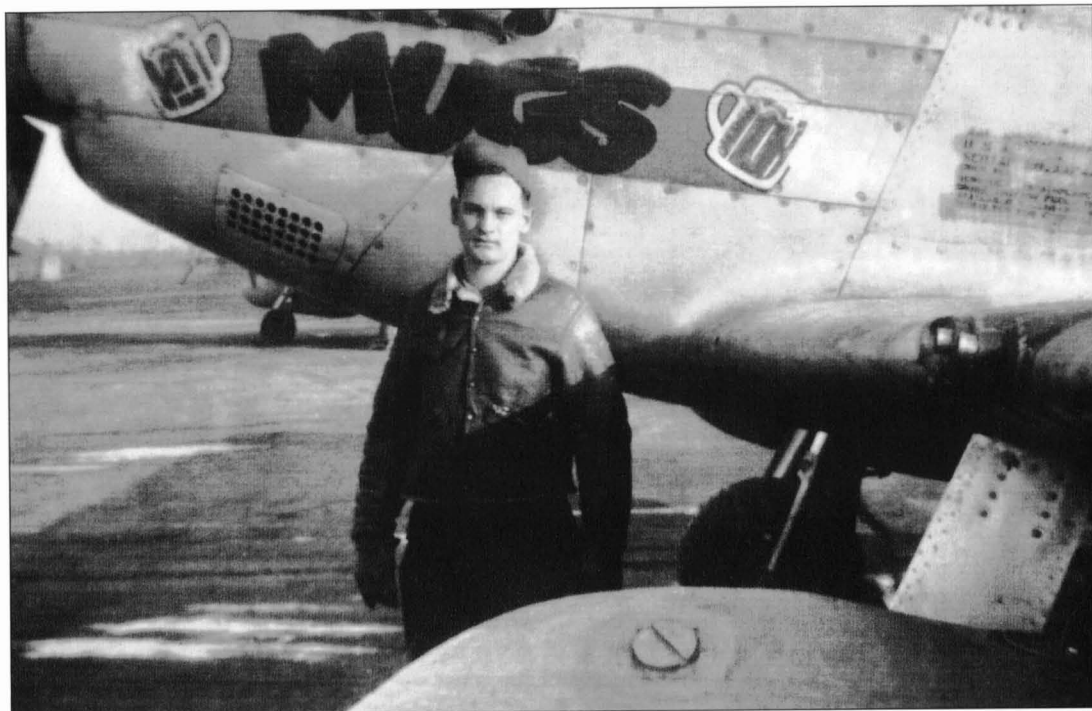
28,000 ft. He manoeuvred his P-51 in behind one of the Messerschmitts and quickly opened fire until the enemy pilot decided to take to his parachute.

Olds had told the rest of the 434th FS to pursue the remaining enemy fighters while he finished off his quarry – an order the P-51 pilots eagerly obeyed. Capt George Gleason was leading 'Newcross Yellow' Section, and he subsequently reported;

'They were 2000 ft above us, and went directly overhead. I called "Newcross Yellow" Section to drop tanks, and started a balls-out spiral to the left. After two 360-degree turns we were in position behind a four-ship flight of enemy fighters, but out of range. I closed in while they were trying to get into a cloudbank. I fired a short burst at 2400 ft but did not get a strike, so kept on bearing down and opened up again at about 500 yards with about 20 degrees of deflection. I saw strikes on both wings, cockpit and fuselage, and also noticed several large and small pieces flying off the aeroplane. The '109 snapped a couple of times, with black smoke pouring out from the nice blaze that had started licking out from beneath the fuselage. The pilot bailed out and I started up through the soup trying to find another Messerschmitt to attack.

'I broke out after about a minute in cloud, and had started towards the fight when I spotted a lone '190 heading for the cloudbank. I wheeled around to the left and was closing on it very rapidly. I opened fire at about 150 yards with about ten degrees of deflection and closed in to about 50 yards, getting hits mainly on his right wing and fuselage. The pilot split-essed through the cloud bank and I followed him right on down, but when I got into compressibility I had to throttle back to keep the stick from porpoising.

'Once this stopped I started in after him again, and caught him at about 5000-6000 ft, closing to within 300 yards. Getting strikes at about 40



435th FS pilot Capt Gordon Doolittle flew this P-51D 44-14406 *MUGS* until he went home in February 1945 (Tabatt collection)

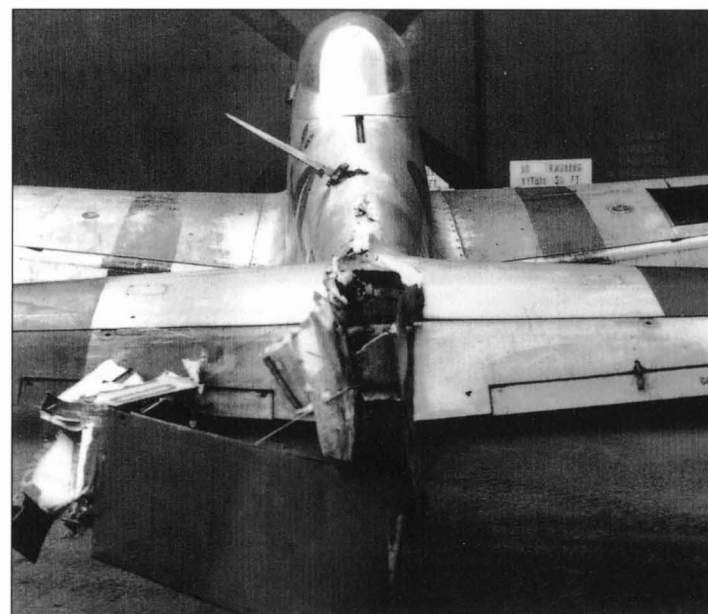
degrees deflection from the left, I swept across him and up to the right, at which point he too bailed out. I took pictures of the pilot in his 'chute and also of the aeroplane when it hit the ground. Both fights started at between 26,000-28,000 ft. I wound up alone, and looked for some more enemy fighters but couldn't find them, so I drove on home.'

Squadronmate Lt Richard Creighton claimed to have destroyed a Bf 109 and probably destroyed an Fw 190, while Lt Gene Wendt got another Bf 109 to give the 434th FS five confirmed kills for the engagement.

Five more victories were added by the 435th FS, with Capt Norman Benoit and Maj Herbert Jordan each getting single Fw 190s. Capt Gordon Doolittle and Lts David King, John Rogers and Fred Shriner each claimed a Bf 109 destroyed. The 435th also suffered the group's only loss of the day when Lt Carl Jarrell (in P-51D 44-14364) was shot down and killed by German fighters near Belzig.

Overall, Eighth Air Force escorts assigned to protect the 2nd AD had been credited with downing 22 German aircraft. The 479th FG had accounted for ten of those claims. Capt George Gleason had scored the last of his 12 aerial victories during the course of the mission, while Maj Robin Olds had got his seventh. The latter pilot would add three more kills to his tally five days later during a 'maximum effort' mission mounted on 14 February.

According to the 479th's group history, no fewer than 71 of its Mustangs took off from Wattisham on the Valentine's Day operation, with three group segments accompanying a PRU F-5 to the Stettin area. The remaining P-51s again escorted 340 B-24s from the 2nd AD to Magdeburg's long suffering marshalling yards. A group was led by Col Riddle and B group by Maj Duffie.



Above, above left and left Lt John W Morrow and his groundcrew go about their business around 434th FS P-51D 44-15086 *CACTUS Jack* (Tabatt collection)

On 2 March 1945 *CACTUS Jack* was badly damaged by a taxiing 436th FS P-51 while under tow at Wattisham. The fighter was subsequently transferred to the unit, which was perhaps obliged to acquire the fighter after it had inflicted such damage to it! (Tabatt collection)



Lt Col Art Jeffrey is seen here at the controls of his P-51K 44-11674 some time after 14 February 1945, when he claimed a Bf 109 for his 14th, and final, victory (Tabatt collection)

Between Magdeburg and southwest Berlin, 434th FS pilots sighted ten enemy aircraft at about 30,000 ft. Squadron CO Lt Col Art Jeffrey was leading the formation of P-51s that spotted the German fighters, and he duly ordered tanks to be dropped before he attacked. He was able to identify the aircraft as Bf 109s just before they split up and scattered, their pilots having sighted the attacking Mustangs.

Jeffrey led two flights in pursuit of three Messerschmitts that he saw fleeing westwards, and he selected the rear fighter for his attack. Opening fire from about 400 yards and closing to 200 yards, Jeffrey observed many strikes on the fighter's fuselage before it spun off to the left, trailing flames and shedding large pieces. The stricken fighter disappeared into the clouds at about 6000 ft. Jeffrey, who had just claimed his 14th, and last, aerial victory, also damaged a second Bf 109 prior to its pilot diving away and escaping into a cloud bank.

Maj Olds made the most claims that day, being credited with the destruction of two Bf 109s and an Fw 190. He was leading 'Newcross Green' Flight at 27,000 ft when two bogies were seen coming in low from behind. Olds turned and saw four more dark shapes climbing while his flight lost altitude. He abandoned the chase of the latter aircraft when the ten Bf 109s being engaged by Jeffrey were called out. 'Green' Flight was



A groundcrewman perches on Lt Col Jeffrey's P-51K 44-11674 (Tabatt collection)

closest to a group fleeing in a southwesterly direction, so he went after them instead.

Four of the leading Bf 109s split-essed out of the fight, but Olds managed to close on one that was slow to take evasive action. He marvelled at his highly efficient K-14 gunsight when hits registered on the fuselage of the enemy aircraft at 450 yards. The German fighter made a weak effort to escape, giving Olds a further opportunity to fire bursts from closer range, resulting in many bright strikes around the cockpit and engine. Smoke poured back from the doomed fighter and it spun out of control into the clouds far below. Olds then attacked a second Bf 109;

'I fired at this one from slightly below and dead astern from about 450 yards. As soon as I saw strikes, the '109 started right, and then with that beautiful K-14 sight I got hits all over the right side of his fuselage. I obtained a few more hits as he rolled over into the inside of his turn, yawing and skidding. He must have been out of control because this yawing and skidding continued – sometimes he was upside down, sometimes falling sideways – straight down.'

The Victory Credits Board reviewer must have initially had doubts about this second Messerschmitt because he left a question mark on that portion of the combat report. Indeed, Olds did not receive final approval for a destroyed enemy aircraft until several days after the action.

Olds quickly moved on to his next target, an Fw 190. Again, he was able to make good use of his K-14 gunsight, which ranged nicely from 450 yards, and enabled his 0.50-cal rounds to strike along the right side of the fighter's fuselage before the German aircraft fell away out of control. Olds had managed to overfly the badly damaged fighter moments earlier, spotting that its pilot was slumped forward at the controls within the

Lt Tom Neely flies his P-51D *Hi-Baller* (serial unknown) in close formation with the 434th's second L2-T-, as denoted by the bar displayed after the squadron ID (Tabatt collection)





Two views of Lt Bill Daudistel's P-51D 44-63176 *The Impatient Virgin*, in flight and on the ground. The top view was probably taken some time after the static shot, as part of the name is beginning to wear off. The aerial photo was possibly taken at around the time that Daudistel shot down a Bf 109 on 14 February 1945 (Tabatt collection)



This starboard side view of *The Impatient Virgin* reveals the name *Mickey's Mustang*. Daudistel (left) is standing alongside his proud groundcrew (Tabatt collection)



demolished cockpit. Large jagged holes were clearly visible in the wings and fuselage before the Focke-Wulf dove away to its destruction.

Squadronmate Lt Eugene Wendt also received credit for multiple kills on the 14th, downing two Bf 109s, and solitary victories were awarded to Capt Richard McChrystal and Lts David Born, William Daudistel and John Golden. The 434th FS also suffered the day's only combat casualty when Lt John Donnell (in P-52D 44-14651) was hit by flak and killed near Dreiskau.

Lt David Born flies his P-51D 44-14393 *Just Born* in early 1945. This aircraft was formerly known as *Flat Top Jr*, and had previously been assigned to Lt Bud Grenning up until he completed his combat tour in November 1944 (Tabatt collection)



P-51D 44-14651 was flown by Lt Berkley Hollister until it was assigned to Lt John Donnell in December 1944. Donnell was shot down and killed by flak whilst flying this aircraft near Dreiskau on 14 February 1945 (Tabatt collection)

The group's pilots had now been credited with the destruction of 20 enemy aircraft during the first two months of the year – a highly respectable tally for that period of the war. These kills on 14 February proved to be the last aerial success for the 479th that month, however.

STRAFING SUCCESSES

For the rest of February, the group would switch its attention to attacking static aircraft on the ground, as USAAF bomber formations now provoked little or no response from Jagdwaffe fighters. Indeed, the strafing attacks on Luftwaffe airfields became commonplace in the final months of the war in Europe. German forces had been squeezed into a corridor by the Allies in the east and the west that would shrink to nothing by early May 1945, and all of the enemy's major air bases were now well within range of marauding Allied fighters keenly seeking out targets to attack. And with fuel supplies rapidly running out, more and more Luftwaffe aircraft were being crowded onto temporary bases in eastern Germany, western Poland and Czechoslovakia.

German fighter opposition to the bombing campaign was crumbling to the point where even Me 262s in search of bomber formations to attack were becoming a liability for the Jagdwaffe because the jet fighters themselves attracted unwanted attention from Allied fighter escorts. A lack of experienced fighter crews also severely limited the effectiveness of the Luftwaffe to the point where offering any aerial resistance to bombing attacks was now little more than a near suicidal gesture of defiance.

The Luftwaffe therefore resorted to the desperate tactic of concentrating aircraft stocks on remote bases well away from population centres and other potentially strategic targets. Most of these bases were ringed with anti-aircraft defences, which made attacks by Allied tactical aircraft a highly dangerous undertaking. The cost would be high, but the USAAF fighter force in particular took the calculated risk of seeking out the Luftwaffe to deal it a final mortal blow.

The first of a series of major attacks on grounded Luftwaffe aircraft by the 479th FG came on 20 February 1945, when the 434th FS helped

434th FS P-51D 44-14395 *The ONLEY Genevieve* of Lt Robert Kline leads this formation in early 1945. Kline claimed three strafing victories in Mustangs, and ended the war flying a P-51K (Scutts)



escort Flying Fortresses to German targets and then ranged over areas of Czechoslovakia and eastern Germany. Having gained permission to seek out targets of opportunity, the squadron duly strafed two trains, resulting in claims for locomotives destroyed by Lt Richard Creighton and Maj Robin Olds.

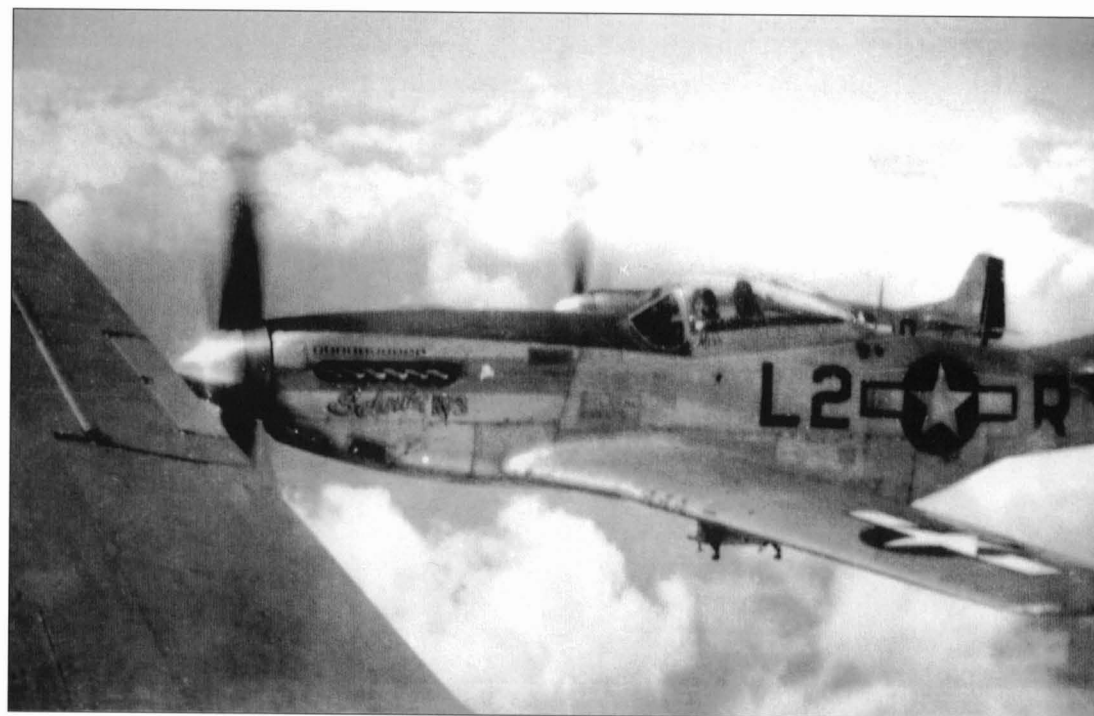
The latter pilot was leading the 434th on this mission, and shortly after attacking the trains, he saw 356th FG pilots strafing the aerodrome at Windleschenlaibach with apparent success. Olds quickly got on the radio and divided up the target area with the other P-51 group, prior to leading in his own Mustangs in a series of strafing runs. They found a wealth of targets, and flew back and forth over their agreed portion of the field.

Eight German aircraft were left burning by each of the two Mustang groups, with several others claimed as damaged. Olds was credited with destroying a Do 217 and an Fw 190, while Lt Robert Kline claimed two Do 217s and shared in the destruction of an He 111 with Lt John Golden. The two pilots also shared a damaged Fw 190. Lt Gene Sears claimed a Do 217, while an He 111 was shared between Capt Donald Pierce and Lt Phillip Brown.

After avoiding another airfield that was obviously heavily defended by flak batteries, the 434th pilots returned to altitude and caught up with the B-17 formation that they were originally assigned to escort. This mission was just the beginning of a period of heavy scoring against grounded aircraft, among other targets.

The next day saw further positive results for the 434th when the squadron again escorted bombers attacking marshalling yards at Nurnberg. After the B-24s from the 2nd AD had dropped their bombs at noon, the squadron ranged over the area and accounted for a number of rail targets. Lts Gail Jacobson and Ossie Huval then found some bombers parked on Gotha airfield, and each accounted for a single He 111

Capt Donald Pierce and his crewchief stand beside their P-51D 44-72336 *Setonia No 3*, named in honour of the preparatory school that bought war bonds to pay for its construction (Tabatt collection)



Setonia No 3 is seen pictured in flight in early 1945. This aircraft survived the war and was subsequently transferred to the Swiss Air Force in March 1948 (Tabatt collection)

destroyed. The 436th FS also strafed an airfield at Nordhausen, where they succeeded in damaging two Ju 188 bombers and claimed a locomotive as destroyed.

This series of escort missions to rail targets continued on 22 February with a strike on marshalling yards at Halberstadt. These raids were part of Operation *Clarion*, which was one of the last offensives mounted by the Allies as part of the strategic bombing campaign. The aim of these missions was to disrupt German communications between the widely dispersed industrial targets and increasingly isolated military concentrations.

After being relieved of their escort duties, 21 pilots from the 436th FS found 15 twin-engined aircraft, as well as a few Fw 190s, on the field at Halberstadt. Squadron CO Maj Duffie led them down in an exploratory dive and found that that base's flak defences were practically non-existent. He started a left-hand strafing pattern that netted him a confirmed Ju 88 and two damaged unidentified twin-engined aircraft. Lt Alfred Smigel duplicated the feat with an He 111 destroyed and two Ju 88s damaged. Lt Anthony Scordino also got a confirmed Ju 88 and two damaged He 111s, while Lt Ray Henry and Capt William Anderson added a destroyed Ju 88 and He 111.

The 479th history lists these credits (destroyed-probable-damaged) for the mission, without comment, in its combat diary;

'5-0-5 Ju 88, 1-0-0 Ju 52, 1-0-4 He 111, 1-0-1 (unidentified twin-engined aircraft), 1-0-0 He 111 with 1-0-0 V1 pick-a-back, 0-0-10 goods cars, 0-0-1 Loco, 0-0-1 staff car, 1-0-1 truck, 1-0-1 radio shack, 0-0-5 buildings.'

During the attack, the group's left-hand pattern was disrupted by 4th FG Mustangs, which then apparently attacked some of the 479th's P-51s

by mistake. Lt Albert DiPaolo (in P-51D 44-15412) reported being hit and was forced down to become a PoW. Squadronmate Lt Peter C Vasseur was not so lucky, however, being killed when his P-51K (44-11739) crashed after being shot up by a 4th FG fighter. On a more positive note, the latter group added another eight German aircraft on the ground to the overall tally, giving the 479th and 4th FGs a healthy bag of destroyed and damaged ground targets during the operation.

There were no further strafing claims for Luftwaffe aircraft for the rest of the month, although a B-17 that had force-landed in eastern Holland on the 23rd was destroyed so as to avoid it being captured intact by the Germans. Additional ground claims would have to wait until March.

NEW MONTH, NO ENEMY

Following its last ditch exertions in February, the Luftwaffe was conspicuous by its absence in the skies over Germany for much of March 1945. On the ground, the Allies were steadily advancing towards the Rhine, crossing the river on the 9th. Retreating German armies made the situation difficult



Lt Jerome Nagel of the 434th FS experienced engine failure while flying Tom Olson's P-51D 44-14212 *LELAH MAY* on 1 March 1945 and he was forced to crash-land near Ipswich (Tabatt collection)



This view of the right-hand side of P-51D 44-14212 is just clear enough to reveal the name *The Slugger* on its nose (Tabatt collection)

for the Luftwaffe, which now had to counter the Allied air offensive with inadequate forces while withdrawing ever deeper into its own territory.

But March started badly for the 479th with the loss of senior pilot Maj Thomas Trabucco, who had been flying with the 435th FS since September 1944. Piloting P-51D 44-15374 *Dotty* on a general 'Rhubarb' operation against rail targets in the Munich area, he simply disappeared near the Bavarian town of Haldenwang. Lt Dick Candelaria was flying as Trabucco's wingman, and he subsequently reported;

'We went down to the deck through a hole in the clouds near Kochel Lake. We strafed for several minutes and then found that the hole had closed in. We were behind the rest of the squadron as we made the last pass. We started up through the undercast, but halfway through the clouds we started back down for no apparent reason. We broke out below the clouds and did a 360-degree turn and started back up again. By now I had fallen slightly behind and a little off to the side.

'The clouds got very thick and I lost sight of Maj Trabucco. I moved off to the side and climbed up by myself. I broke through and called him, telling him I was on top. I had found the flight and was with the squadron leader. He answered and said he would soon join us. The squadron leader then called him and Maj Trabucco said he was on top and would soon join us, asking for our heading. We all presumed he was all right, but when the squadron leader called him again he did not answer, and failed to answer after that on all channels. I had flown instruments with Maj Trabucco several times before, and he had always been smooth and right. Although he was aggressive, he was not reckless.'

Maj Trabucco's body was found by the Germans and buried the next day at Haldenwang.

Future six-kill ace Richard Candelaria claimed three Bf 109s damaged during a strafing attack on a small airfield near Dummer Lake 48 hours after Maj Trabucco's demise. 'Lakeside White' Flight attacked and Candelaria led Lts Billy Means and Charles Heathman down on a dive-strafing pass that resulted in them claiming three Bf 109s damaged. When the flight had recovered from its pass, the pilots noticed that several of the aircraft were dummies, probably intended as bait for strafing Allied aircraft. The aroused gunners sent up an angry mix of anti-aircraft fire, and this stopped the pilots from making additional strafing passes.

German efforts were becoming decidedly more desperate as the perimeter continued to shrink and the Luftwaffe's aerial potency declined. Further deadly traps were discovered by Allied aircraft which ranged overhead in greater numbers each day. Airfields crammed with tempting targets – including both serviceable and unserviceable aircraft, as well as dummies – and ringed with anti-aircraft batteries became more numerous. Hundreds of Luftwaffe aircraft were claimed on the ground, but the Allies paid a high price for this success as many fighters were shot down.

March saw increased claims of German aircraft destroyed on the ground by Eighth Air Force fighters, with the 4th FG, for example, being credited with at least 30 while other groups made claims in excess of 20. April would see yet more opportunities for attacking Luftwaffe aircraft stranded on open fields or hidden in forests that could no longer provide cover to the freely ranging Allied fighters.

Maj Robin Olds was able to boost his tally to ten aerial victories on 19 March when he led the 434th FS (of which he was now CO) in an escort mission for 2nd AD B-24s targeting Leipheim airfield. 435th FS CO Maj Jordan was leading A group, and he gave Olds permission to make a sweep with his squadron, as the latter recalled;

'I left the bombers and dropped down to 10,000 ft, with light haze on the ground. Just beyond Paderborn, I headed northwest towards Bielefeld. My wingman called in bogies at "nine o'clock high". At this time we were down at 7500-8000 ft. I headed in the described direction and picked up the bogies. They were a good deal higher than us, and flying in a rough resemblance of our fighter formation.

'As we approached, climbing as fast as we could, they started a turn to the left. Drawing near, I identified them as bandits – Me 109s and Fw 190s, approximately 20 to 25 in number, with Fw 190s predominating. I tacked on to their turn with my nine Mustangs and positioned myself behind the "Jerry" formation's tail-end charlies. The difficulty was that the "Jerry" leader, who was in an Fw 190, was in the same position as my tail-end charlie. Our altitude was 15,000 ft now, and I saw that we were right over Handorf airfield, just northeast of Munster.

'Cautioning my boys to be especially watchful, and to keep that "Kraut" leader in sight at all times, I closed on an Me 109 to the rear of their formation. In closing, I watched several Fws do barrel rolls and slow rolls, still keeping within their "Lufbery". They looked plenty sassy and good. I got into range on my '109 and opened fire from about 700 yards with 50 to 60 degrees deflection. I tracked and ranged carefully with my gunsight, but the "Kraut" passed under the sun and I couldn't see my reticules for a while. Then when we went around in the circle, I found that my gunsight had dumped.

'I flicked to fixed sight and fired some more, noticing strikes as the '109 disappeared under my nose. I estimated his position and fired again, then dumped my nose to find him. He was gone. I dived slightly looking for him, but pulled back up, wanting to keep the main formation in sight. My No 4 man later stated that he saw a Me 109 go down.

'I kept in the "Lufbery" and picked out an Fw 190. This beggar began to do barrel rolls as I closed on him. I only wasted time and ammunition firing, for I got no visible strikes. I left him because he was getting me into a precarious position right under his buddies.

'I pulled back up again, and as I did so, the "Krauts" went down. I looked around, checking for my own boys and determining whether or not this was another try on "Jerry's" part to suck us down. We seemed to be the only ones up, so I went down to pick up the "Krauts" again. I lost them in the haze and circled around at 4000 ft.

'I had lost my wingman and, in glancing over my left shoulder, saw an aeroplane giving every indication of trying to join up with me. I didn't want him for a wingman because it was an Fw 190. I broke into him. He seemed startled and broke away. I followed him as he did a barrel roll going down, and fired as he pulled out. My range was about 400 yards and deflection from 15 to zero degrees. He did some good weaving but I managed to clobber him good and proper. I got many hits in the engine section and wing roots. He pulled up sharply, jettisoned his canopy and bailed out.

'Just as he climbed out, it looked as if he had released a whole stack of newspapers or something from his cockpit. I had to turn sharply to avoid running into him. After straightening out, I saw his aeroplane, streaming flame and black smoke, arc over and head straight down.'

434th FS pilots Lts Gail Jacobson and Frank Taylor shared in the destruction of a third Fw 190 over Handorf airfield.

Encounters with the formidable German jets began again on 25 March when the 435th FS met Me 262s southwest of Hamburg. Lt Floyd Salze had assumed the leadership of the second element in his flight when its leader had turned back early with mechanical problems. Now deep within German territory, he sighted a formation of seven jets flying where one of the P-51 flights should have been! He described the ensuing engagement in his combat report:

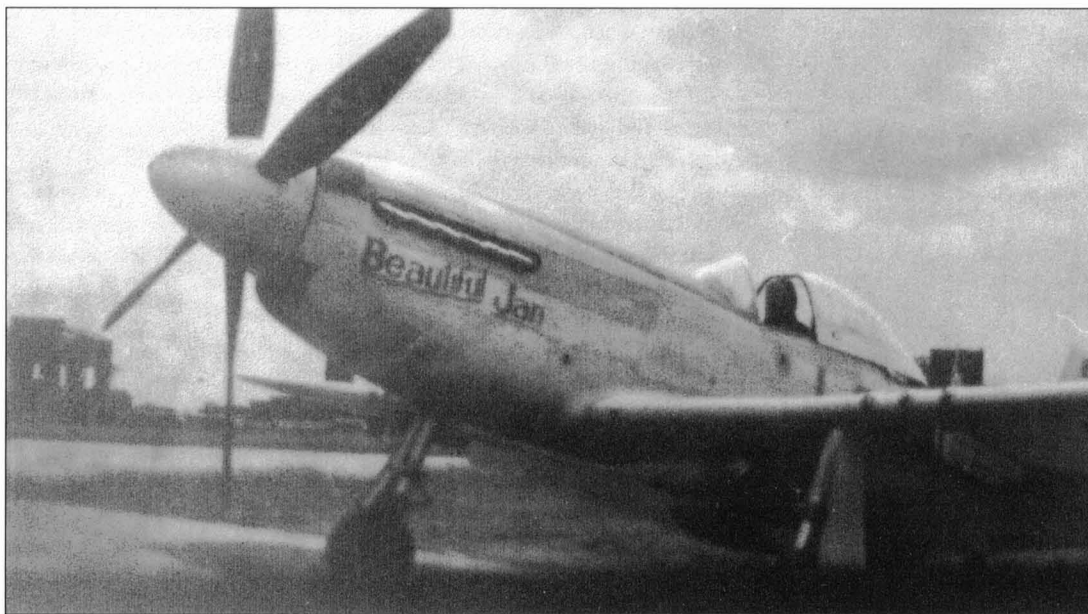
'As the jets started in on the bombers from about "five o'clock", I called them as coming in, and I kept waiting for the flight leader to go after them. My radio was bad and no one heard me, so after the jets passed in front of me I broke after them and fired at one, then they all went down in a dive except for two of them. Someone shot down one of them and I followed the other jet up and to the right. He went out about five miles and turned to the right again. I fired a very short burst at him but he was out of range. As we got lower I began to gain on him.

'As we passed over Hamburg I was firing tracers, and didn't have much ammunition left. I noticed some strikes around the fuselage and one wing and lost the jet in the haze. Just before I lost him his right engine unit was giving out brown smoke, so he must have added power.'

Ten minutes before Lt Salze's partially successful engagement, Lt Gene Wendt, leading the 'Newcross Yellow' Flight of the 434th FS, had a more productive combat, as he reported later;

'We immediately added throttle and drove up close to the bombers at about 29,000 ft. Just as we got to a point "three o'clock high", I saw two Me 262s closing on the tail box of bombers from "five o'clock" slightly

Lt Gene Wendt flew P-51D 44-14391, which he named after his wife. It survived the war and was transferred to the French Air Force (Tabatt collection)



P-51K 44-11755 "My Pride 'n Joy" was the usual mount of 435th FS ace Lt Richard Candelaria, who was the only pilot in the squadron to score more than five aerial victories. He was shot down by flak and taken prisoner while flying this fighter on 13 April 1945 (Tabatt collection)

high to them at an altitude of about 21,000 ft. I immediately ordered the section to drop tanks and made a right-hand diving turn to get in position on the jets.

'Before I could get into position, the lead jet attacked the bombers and shot down two of them, then it pulled up in a very steep right climbing turn. As the Me 262 did this I was struggling to get rid of my belly tanks. They wouldn't come off, so I dived head-on at the jet anyway. Closing to about 1800 yards, with 70 degrees deflection, I gave him a short burst. I didn't see any strikes, and the enemy aircraft continued to climb. I pulled out very sharply and swung around onto his tail. I fired a couple of good bursts from 1000 yards with 80 degrees deflection and closed up my curve of pursuit, observing strikes all over the fuselage, cockpit and wing roots. Then I fired another burst from dead astern to 30 ft or less, before I passed by him. The Me 262 went into a spin and began to pour out flames from



The loyal groundcrew of "My Pride 'n Joy" stand proudly by the machine they maintained until it ran afoul of enemy anti-aircraft fire (Tabatt collection)



Maj Robin Olds pilots his final P-51D 44-72922 SCAT VII in late April 1945 (Tabatt collection)

around the cockpit. I started to follow as the Me 262 went down in a violent, uncontrolled spin, but temporarily lost control of my aeroplane to the point where I had my hands full with it.'

Wendt need not have concerned himself, as his target was seen to break up and crash. The destroyed and damaged Messerschmitt jets were later identified as having come from III./JG 7.

Two more Me 262s were claimed by group pilots as damaged during fleeting engagements on 31 March and 4 April, the first action involving Lt Robert Bromschwig of the 434th and the second Lt Edward Sims of the 435th.

The next confirmed aerial victories for the 479th were claimed on 7 April, when the group helped escort 340 B-24s from the 2nd AD that had been sent to attack factories in Düneberg. The various engagements that took place during the course of the mission resulted in the 479th making its final multi-victory claims. Some 11 kills were credited to pilots from Wattisham, two of which were highly prized Me 262s.

The group's last aerial ace of the war emerged from this operation when Lt Richard Candelaria of the 435th FS claimed four Bf 109s destroyed and an Me 262 as a probable kill. 434th FS CO Maj Robin Olds was leading the group when he sighted contrails to the left at 27,000 ft midway between Bremen and Dummer Lake. As he drew closer to investigate, he spotted Me 262s flying in formations of three in four distinct groups. Despite manoeuvring wildly in an attempt to get on the tails of the enemy jets, Olds was left frustrated as he was only able to fire a few shots from well out of range – he claimed one Me 262 damaged. Later, he attacked and shot down a Bf 109 that had just destroyed a B-24. It was his 13th, and

last, aerial victory of World War 2 (he subsequently claimed four MiG kills over North Vietnam in 1967).

When Maj Olds raced headlong after the Me 262s, Lt Candelaria was separated from his flight in the wild manoeuvring that characterised this fruitless chase. Whilst chastising himself for losing his squadronmates, Candelaria arced above the bombers all alone. He heard Olds radio the order for the 434th FS to 'drop tanks', but could not see any enemy aircraft in his immediate vicinity. A few minutes later distress flares were observed coming from the formation of bombers below him, so Candelaria looked around and saw two Me 262s racing up towards him from his left.

Retaining his own external tanks, Candelaria took the lead jet head-on, but without success, as the German pilot ducked under him. In frustration, Candelaria dropped his tanks in a futile attempt to hit the Me 262! Following the elusive jet with a half roll, he managed to make a firing pass when another Messerschmitt attacked the bomber formation. He saw hits on its fuselage near the cockpit and smoke starting to trail in the jet's wake. It was subsequently observed going straight down, still trailing smoke, and was listed as probably destroyed.

Meanwhile, the second Me 262 had positioned itself behind Candelaria, opening fire and hitting the Mustang's right wing with a cannon shell. The 435th FS pilot broke hard into his attacker, but the jet dived away too fast for the Mustang to match its speed. Returning to the bombers, Candelaria saw ten to fifteen Bf 109s attacking from different directions. He yelled out a warning over the radio and went for the leader

Maj Robin Olds is perched gleefully on P-51D 44-11746 SCAT VI in this photograph, dated 4 April 1945. His score by then included no fewer than 17 aerial and strafing victories (Tabatt collection)



of the German gaggle. However, the latter pilot was clearly a seasoned veteran, for he easily avoided every attacking thrust made by Candelaria and duly shot down one of the bombers.

The young Mustang pilot persisted, however, and finally got into a position to score some telling hits on this wily opponent. Even though his aircraft was damaged, the *Jagdflieger* evaded Candelaria until he finally got in a telling burst which caused smoke and white coolant to stream from the Bf 109. At this point its pilot finally took to his parachute. This was the signal for the remaining German fighters in the immediate area to set upon the lone Mustang in their midst, but they seemed to be inexperienced, for Candelaria was easily able to avoid every attack. Indeed, one pilot actually bailed out before any strikes were observed on his aircraft. Two others failed to match the skill of their American opponent and ended up being shot down.

Seven more P-51s from Candelaria's 435th FS arrived just in time to watch the last of the downed enemy aircraft hit the ground and scatter the rest of the Bf 109 gaggle.

With four confirmed claims and a probable jet to his credit, Candelaria had become the group's last ace. He was certainly exhausted by the stress and effort of the battle, reporting that his knees were weak and his hands shaking when he landed. This residue of fear and excitement made his new status seem well earned.

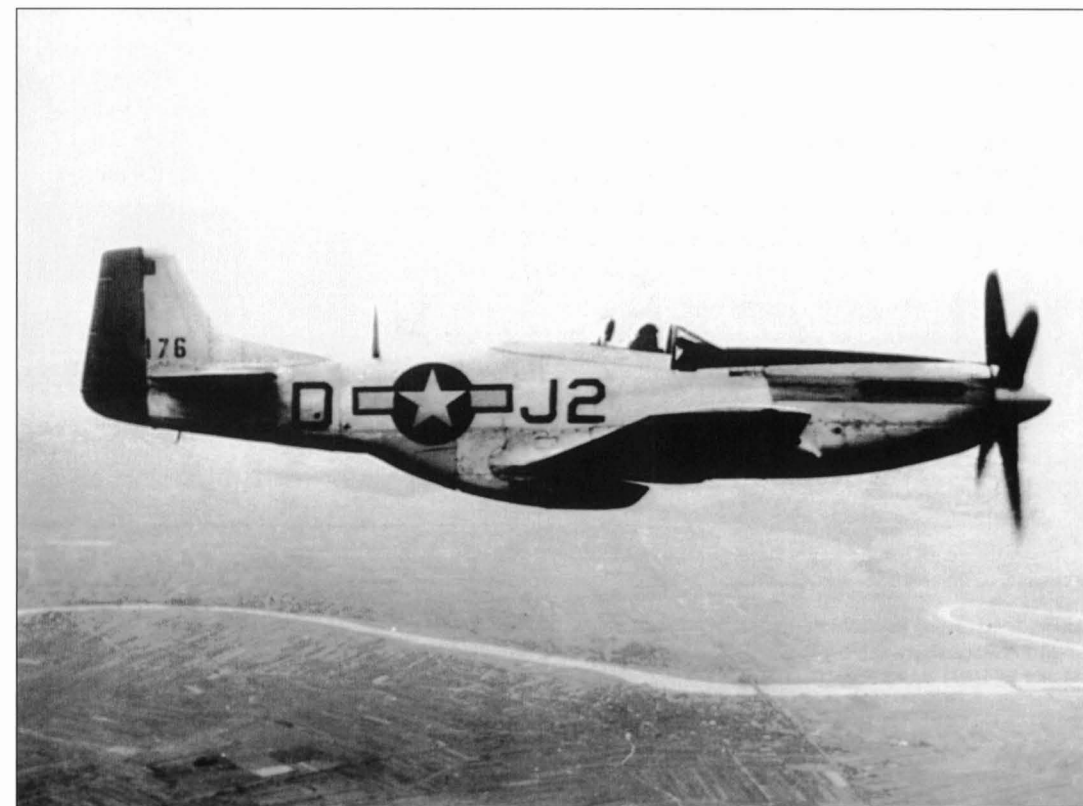
Fellow 435th FS pilot Capt Verne Hooker also claimed multiple kills during the course of this mission. He was leading the squadron when he observed what were probably the two Me 262s that Candelaria had confronted a few minutes earlier. He managed to make a long-range attack on one of them, but could not finish the Me 262 off before a second pair of jets forced him to break off his attack in order to drive this new threat away from the bombers.

Improbably, one of Hooker's flight leaders, Lt Bill Barsky, saw the first Messerschmitt roll over in apparent difficulty and the pilot abandon his aircraft. Hooker was credited with destroying the Me 262 when other squadron pilots also saw the bail-out and the pilotless aircraft hit the ground. Hooker was then able to close on the tail of an unwary Bf 109 and shoot it down too. Finally, Lt Hilton O Thompson accounted for a second Me 262. He would down a second jet later in the month.

The action on 7 April 1945 represented the German interceptors' swansong in World War 2. Operation *Elbe* had seen 100+ Fw 190s and Bf 109s sortied from bases around Stendal and Gardelegen to provide cover for Me 262s from JG 7 and KG 54. Pilots flying the latter machines had been ordered to mount a do-or-die effort to deliver a crippling blow to USAAF bombers. In the end, 17 'heavies' were lost, at least eight of which were downed by the Jagdwaffe (including one B-24 that was rammed). Bomber gunners claimed 40 fighters shot down and the fighter groups were credited with 64 kills. *Elbe* had been an abject failure.

STRAFING FINALE

With the Luftwaffe now well and truly broken as a fighting force in the air, USAAF fighter groups spent the rest of April 1945 shooting up grounded aircraft on various bases across Germany and eastern Europe. The 479th FG found itself in the vanguard of four of these missions on 13, 16, 17 and



P-51D 44-11176 *Butch*, was usually flown by Lt Lawrence Keefe of the 435th FS, and it was named after his high school sweetheart. Records suggest that he flew the aircraft continuously between September 1944 and war's end (Tabatt collection)

18 April. The group history recorded the results of the first of these operations in the following somewhat casual terms;

'The escort went off perfectly except that the "heavies" decided to hit Neumunster instead of their primary (Hagenow). When the fighters finally broke off, they checked Lubeck-Blankensee, Kaltenkirchen, Tarnewitz, Salzwedel and Ratzburger Lake aerodromes, and came home with claims of 47-0-33 aircraft on the ground. Final confirmation of these claims resulted in awards of 37 destroyed, no probables and 28 damaged.'

Maj Robin Olds led 'Newcross White' Flight on a dive-strafting pass at Lubeck-Blankensee, where he identified his targets as rare Ar 234 jet reconnaissance bombers. He accounted for one of the bombers, as did his wingman, Lt Roy Rossel. They then moved on to Tarnewitz, where Olds damaged an Me 410 before heavy flak drove off the 434th FS.

Capt Verne Hooker, who was the joint group/435th FS leader for this mission, managed to attack the heavily defended Tarnewitz airfield, where he claimed two Ju 88s destroyed and two more damaged, while Capt Theo Sowerby, heading up 'Lakeside White Flight', accounted for another Ju 88 destroyed and four more damaged. Lt William Rourke completed the 435th claims with a third Ju 88 destroyed and two others damaged.

In spite of the deadly anti-aircraft fire coming up from the field, Capt Sowerby heard a request over the radio from Lt Richard Candelaria for permission to make another pass at a tempting target. Sowerby gave his approval. Unfortunately, Candelaria's aircraft was heavily damaged by flak during this run and he reported that his oil pressure had zeroed.



Lt Henry Porter Plunk flew this P-51D 44-14532 *AMBROSIA* between October 1944 and VE-Day (Tabatt collection)

Sowerby gave him a heading of 200 degrees, which Candelaria was able to follow for about five minutes before being forced to bail out near the town of Wittenberg. The young ace, who was flying his usual P-51K-5 44-11755, named *My Pride and Joy*, was quickly captured.

Candelaria was not the only loss, for 434th FS pilot Lt Ossie Huval (in P-51K 44-12156) was also posted missing in action after his attack on the airfield at Ratzburger Lake.

There was also good hunting for 436th FS pilots, who between them claimed no fewer than 30 enemy aircraft destroyed on the ground at Salzwedel. This tally comprised 16 Fw 190s, two Bf 109s and about a dozen assorted twin-engined aircraft (Ju 88s, Bf 110s and Me 410s). A further 18 aircraft were damaged.

The climax for air and ground kills came on 16 April, when Eighth Air Force fighter pilots claimed 724 aircraft destroyed on the ground. These successes came at a price, however, for a record 31 fighters were downed by flak.

Many Luftwaffe aircraft had been sighted on German and Czech airfields, giving the Americans a day of high scoring in the face of murderous anti-aircraft fire. Maj Robin Olds led the 479th as 'Newcross Yellow One' when the group strafed Reichersburg, and he duly enjoyed his best day of strafing success with five ground kills – two Ju 87s, one Bf 109, one Bf 110 and an He 177. These victories made Olds the leading strafing ace in the 479th with 11 kills. Capt Donald Pierce claimed four destroyed and Lt John Golden got three others. Lts Robert Munson and Gail Jacobson each accounted for two Fw 190s, and five other pilots got one each for a squadron total of 20 destroyed.

The 435th FS got just one kill south of Pocking, but the 436th FS had a field day at Landstedt. Its pilots were credited with the destruction of 23 Fw 190s, three Bf 109s and four Fw 190s. No fewer than eight pilots claimed multiple kills, with CO Maj Claire Duffie and Lt Charles Elmgren leading the way with four Fw 190s destroyed apiece. Lts George Witzel and Ray Henry claimed three Focke-Wulfs each, and Lt Alfred

Smigel got two Fw 190s and a Bf 109. Capt Presson Shane and Lts Richard Palson and Grover McLaurin were each credited with two Focke-Wulf fighters.

Six pilots from the 434th were listed as 'Not Yet Returned' by dusk on 16 April – the unit had faced withering flak particularly at Erferding airfield. Lt John Golden (in P-51D 44-14856) bellied in ten miles west of Regensburg and was seen talking to farmers who waved when they were buzzed by group Mustangs – he duly became a PoW for the final three weeks of the war. Lt Frank Taylor (in P-51D 44-14740) radioed that he was bailing out west of Linz, and he too was captured. Lt Harold Krauss (in P-51D 44-14929) was not so lucky, for he was killed when he crashed whilst attempting a forced landing in his crippled fighter at an Allied forward airfield. Lt Donald Stott (in P-51D 44-14629) also perished when his fighter was shot down over Erferding. Finally, Lt James Bouchier and Francis Scheiss bellied-in and were recovered.

The group's final ground claims of the war came on 17 and 18 April, when a total of 56 aircraft were reported to have been destroyed at a series of German fields. All three squadrons tasted success, and there were multiple kill claimants. Leading the way on the 17th were 436th FS pilots Maj Claire Duffie and Lt Richard Palson with four destroyed apiece, while on the 18th 434th FS pilots Lts Gail Jacobson, Clifford Bowers and Jerome Nagel each claimed three kills.

Sadly, the latter date also saw the 479th FG suffer its final combat casualty when Capt Jay Malone (in P-51D 44-14601) of 436th FS was shot down by flak whilst strafing targets at Neuberg airfield.

Exactly one week later, on 25 April 1945, Lt Hilton Thompson of the 434th FS made history when he scored the final victory credited to the Eighth Air Force in World War 2. Flying at the head of the second element of 'Newcross Blue' Flight, which was escorting B-24s from the 2nd AD en route to attack Traunstein-Berchtesgaden, Thompson sighted a bogie shadowing the bombers some 2000 ft above his altitude of 24,000 ft. Accompanied by two other Mustangs, he closed on the fast-moving aircraft and soon identified it as an Arado Ar 234 jet reconnaissance-bomber.

Lt Harold Stotts's P-51D 44-14523 *The YAKIMA Chief* is seen here in the 434th FS revetment in early 1945. It was written off in a crash-landing after the war whilst being flown by Lt Frank Scheiss (Tabatt collection)



An in-flight shot of Lt Harold Stott and his P-51D in early 1945
(Tabatt collection)



Stott perches on the wing of his distinctively-marked Mustang, named after the indigenous tribe of his native Washington state
(Tabatt collection)



Once again, the K-14 gunsight proved its value when Thompson got hits from 800 yards. Closing rapidly, he fired from 600 yards down to 300 yards, and saw many hits on the left side of the fuselage resulting in large chunks of debris trailing behind the target. The Ar 234 went into a 40-degree spiral and Lt Harold Stott sent it on its way with several parting bursts until the pilot abandoned his aircraft at 8000-10,000 ft. This was Thompson's second jet kill, for he had also been credited with shooting down an Me 262 on 7 April mission. He thus gained the distinction of



Lt Hilton Thompson and, presumably, his armourer inspect one of his Mustang's 0.50-cal guns
(Tabatt collection)

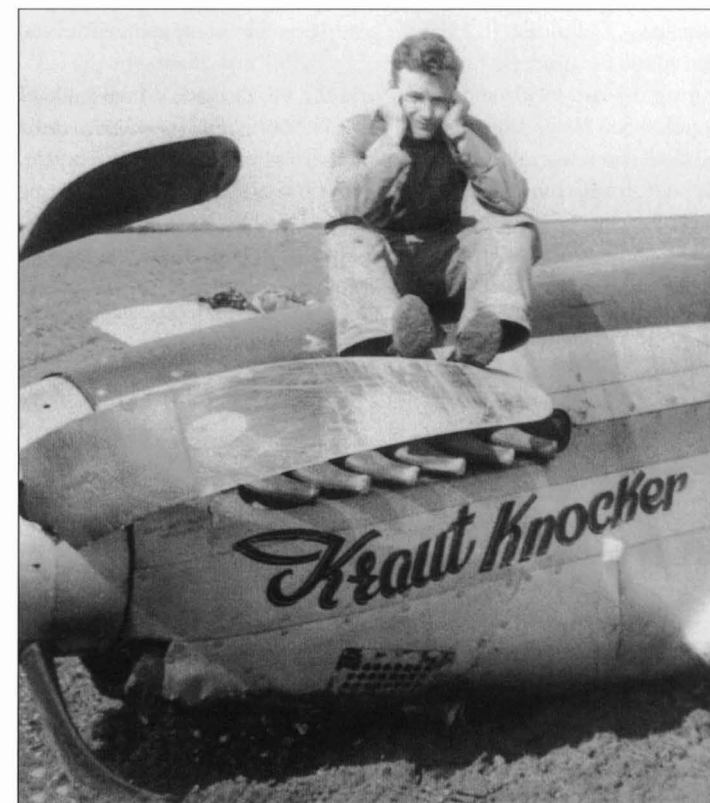
being the only pilot from the 479th FG to be credited with downing two enemy jets.

Despite hostilities now being all but over, the group continued to suffer combat losses right up to VE-Day when 436th FS pilots Lts Robert Young (on 22 April) and Anthony Scordino (on 4 May in P-51K 44-11749) were killed in flying accidents.

AFTER THE WAR

The cessation of hostilities on 7 May 1945 led to a brief period of tedious inactivity for a fighter group whose pilots were still very much at the point of being 'lathered up' for action. One of the 'distractions' that kept personnel of the 434th FS occupied during the first weeks of peace was the introduction of other aircraft types into its ranks. A handful of P-47s were flown into Wattisham to replace some of the unit's sleek Mustangs, and although the pilots were generally indifferent to the massive Republic fighter, at least they offered some diversion from the inactivity.

One other addition to the squadron was an all-black B-26 Marauder that arrived at the base as a hack aircraft in late May 1945. Maj Robin Olds was still commander of the 434th at this time, and his exuberance was in evidence when he took charge of the twin-engined bomber. He had been successful in his experience with the P-38 'twin', so, he reasoned, why not a high-powered bomber? He cadged a flight with the crew that had delivered the bomber, observing procedures for take-off and landing, then dismissed the delivery pilots and flew the tricky bomber back to Wattisham. One of the enlisted 479th groundcrew who went along on the



Lt Bob Bromschwig is feigning only slightly his dejection at his P-51 coming to grief in a belly landing on 28 May 1945 (Tabatt collection)



A groundcrewman stands on the wing of P-51D 44-11674 *Speedball*, formerly *Boomerang JR*. The aircraft was later assigned to Lt Hilton Thompson (*Tabatt collection*)

flight stated afterwards that he would fly with Olds through the gates of hell after the white-knuckle trip back to base.

June 1945 was given over to training and drill. It was speculated that the 479th would be redeployed to the Pacific – perhaps the China-Burma-India Theatre. Some of the long time pilots were reassigned during the latter part of 1945, whilst others who had been held as PoWs were repatriated and either passed through Wattisham or came back to duty with the group. Amongst the latter was Capt James Hollingsworth, who was finally able to report his combat of 5 December 1944 and add a probable victory to the group’s overall tally.

The end of the war did not mean the casualty list was complete, however, for Capt Hilton O Thompson was killed in a training accident in P-51D 44-14523 on 19 July 1945. As previously mentioned, he had been credited with the final Eighth Air Force victory in the ETO, and had survived five months of combat, only to die during a routine flight that was intended to sharpen flying and combat skills.

Of the other leading pilots in the group, Art Jeffrey had tour expired in late March and Robin Olds had taken over command of the 434th from him. The latter led the unit until he too returned home in August. Maj Claire A P Duffie gave up command of the 436th FS on 9 November 1945, just prior to the group redeploying back to the continental United States for deactivation in December. The 479th FG had been the last fighter group to join the Eighth Air Force in the ETO, and it was also the last to leave.

When the Korean War broke out in June 1950, the 479th was reactivated and equipped with F-51Ds (redesignated P-51s) at George Air Force Base, California. In 1953 the group began re-equipment with F-86 Sabres, and these were in turn replaced by F-100 Super Sabres in 1954-55. During the late 1950s and early 1960s the 479th made a final trade of aircraft when it was issued with the F-104 Starfighter. It had thus come full circle, for it was once again equipped with a fast Lockheed interceptor. The 479th was subsequently redesignated as a tactical fighter training wing.

A single war had determined the combat destiny of the 479th FG, but its one moment of glory was shining indeed for the last USAAF fighter organisation to see action in Europe.



A close-up of the script painted onto the nose of 44-11674 by Sgt Hayner (*Tabatt collection*)

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

479th FG AERIAL & STRAFING ACES

Name (unit)	Aerial Kills	Strafing Kills	Total	Notes
Maj Robin Olds (434)	13	11	24	(4 aerial in Vietnam)
Capt George W Gleason (434)	12	2.5	14.5	
Lt Col Arthur F Jeffrey (434)	14	0	14	
Maj Claire A P Duffie (434)	3	8.5	11.5	
Capt Gail E Jacobson (434)	4.5	6	10.5	
1Lt Thomas C Olson (434)	1	9.5	10.5	
Maj Donald J Pierce (434)	0	8.5	8.5	
Capt Theodore Sowerby (435)	2	6.5	8.5	
2Lt Richard C J Palson (436)	0	8	8	
1Lt Charles B Elmgren (436)	0	7	7	
Capt James Hollingsworth (434)	0	7	7	(3 aerial in MTO)
1Lt Ernest J Hopcraft (436)	0	7	7	
1Lt George H Witzel (436)	0	7	7	
1Lt John T Golden (434)	1	5.5	6.5	
Capt Hans J Grasshoff (436)	2.5	4	6.5	
Capt Richard G Candelaria (435)	6	0	6	
1Lt John W Hansen (434)	2	4	6	
Lt Col James M Herren (434)	4	2	6	
Capt Verne E Hooker (435)	2	4	6	
1Lt Tom D Neely (434)	2	4	6	
1Lt Kenneth J Hansen (434)	0	5	5	
Capt John N Murr (434)	2	3	5	
1Lt Jerome K Nagel (434)	1	4	5	
Capt Presson S Shane (436)	0	5	5	
1Lt Alfred J Smigel (436)	0	5	5	
1Lt Victor Wolski (436)	3	2	5	
1Lt Richard D Creighton (434)	0	5	2.5	(5 aerial in Korea)
Col Hubert Zemke (HQ)	2.5	0	2.5	(15.25 aerial & 8.5 strafing with 56th FG)
Capt Clarence O Johnson (436)	1	0	1	(4 aerial MTO & 2 aerial & 6 strafing with 352nd FG)
Lt Col Sidney S Woods (HQ)	0	1	1	(2 aerial Pacific & 5 aerial & 3 ground with 4th FG)

APPENDIX 2

479th FG ETO PILOT CASUALTIES

Date Lost	Name (unit)	Nature of Accident
25/5/44	Capt William A Walker (436)	KIFA
9/6/44	Lt Edward J Spillane Jr (436)	KIFA
17/6/44	Capt Calvin J Butler (435)	PoW
17/6/44	Lt James K Ohligschlager (435)	PoW
19/6/44	Lt Frank Grdenich (434)	KIA
19/6/44	Lt Ward A Kuentzal (434)	KIA
19/6/44	Lt Leonard K Horne (435)	KIA
19/6/44	Lt Donald D McClure (435)	KIA
20/6/44	Lt Louis K Nesselbush (436)	PoW
22/6/44	Lt Keith E Canella (434)	KIA
22/6/44	Lt Dwight F Ilsley (434)	KIA
22/6/44	Lt Leroy Lutz (434)	KIA
22/6/44	Lt Albert S J Tucker Jr (434)	PoW
27/6/44	Lt Burton S Gross (435)	KIA
4/7/44	Lt Rayne B Fairchild (435)	KIA
4/7/44	Capt Robert D Green (HQ)	KIA
4/7/44	Lt Jack S Denny (434)	evaded
5/7/44	Lt Clayton F Proctor (434)	KIA
6/7/44	Lt Jene A Haas (434)	PoW
15/7/44	Lt Flamm D Harper (434)	evaded
21/7/44	Capt Jack G Grossenbacher (434)	KIA
24/7/44	Capt Thomas T Galloway (436)	KIA
24/7/44	Lt Neil W Kemper (436)	evaded
24/7/44	Lt Alexander Evanenکو (435)	KIA
27/7/44	Lt Marden L McArthur (434)	KIA
27/7/44	Lt William B McKay (435)	KIA
28/7/44	Lt Robert R Teeter (436)	KIFA
2/8/44	Lt Fred A Moser Jr (436)	PoW
4/8/44	Capt Elmer Hartman (436)	KIFA
5/8/44	Lt Carl W Moore (435)	KIA
8/8/44	Capt John J Courtney Jr (435)	evaded
9/8/44	Maj Frank J Keller (434)	PoW
10/8/44	Lt Col Kyle L Riddle (HQ)	evaded
10/8/44	Lt James E Fleming Jr (434)	KIA
14/8/44	Lt Thomas J O'Holleran (436)	PoW
15/8/44	Capt Hiram G Turner (434)	PoW
15/8/44	Lt James L Wallace (434)	KIA
18/8/44	Lt Phillip W Manning (434)	KIA
28/8/44	Lt William N Howard (436)	evaded
5/9/44	Maj Raymond S Carter (435)	KIA
6/9/44	Lt Calvin J Murphy Jr (434)	KIA
9/9/44	Lt Everett P Ford (435)	KIFA
14/9/44	Lt Ivan E Ervin (435)	KIFA
14/9/44	Lt Chester W Granville (435)	KIFA
17/9/44	Capt George K Sykes (435)	evaded
21/9/44	Lt Thomas A Gavrys (434)	KIA

Date Lost	Name (unit)	Nature of Accident
26/9/44	Lt Harry E Little (434)	PoW
27/9/44	Lt William H Rodgers (434)	KIA
2/10/44	Lt Quentin S Pavlock (434)	KIFA
7/10/44	Lt James E Frolking (436)	evaded
30/10/44	Col Hubert Zemke (HQ)	PoW
30/10/44	Lt Col James M Herren (434)	KIA
30/10/44	Lt Douglas T Holmes (434)	PoW
6/11/44	Lt Marion W Steele (436)	KIA
8/11/44	Lt Heinz Detlefson (435)	KIA
8/11/44	Lt Thomas V Smith (435)	PoW
5/12/44	Lt Barrett B Eskell (436)	PoW
5/12/44	Lt Ronald L Maley (434)	PoW
5/12/44	Lt Walter A Neumann (434)	KIA
5/12/44	Maj John A Sullivan (436)	KIA
10/12/44	Lt William D Clarke (435)	KIFA
12/12/44	Lt Robert B Hymans (435)	KIFA
12/12/44	Lt Robert N Pigg (435)	KIA
13/12/44	Lt Dewey H Hollis (434)	KIFA
23/12/44	Lt Thomas D Neely (434)	PoW
25/12/44	Capt James M Hollingsworth (434)	PoW
25/12/44	Lt Edward L Hurtig (434)	KIA
25/12/44	Lt Wendell H Marlowe (434)	KIA
25/12/44	Lt Douglas L Red (436)	KIA
13/1/45	Lt Raymond E King (436)	KIA
5/2/45	Lt Norbert W Rock (435)	KIFA
9/2/45	Lt Carl B Jarrell (435)	PoW
14/2/45	Lt John C Donnell Jr (435)	KIA
22/2/45	Lt Peter C Vassuer (436)	KIA
22/2/45	Lt Albert R DiPaola (436)	PoW
28/2/45	Lt Charles T Schoen Jr (436)	KIA
1/3/45	Maj Thomas F Trabucco (435)	KIA
3/3/45	Lt Elbert N Harris (434)	KIA
11/3/45	Lt Lewis C Smith (436)	KIA
4/4/45	Lt Thurman E Sands (434)	KIFA
13/4/45	Lt Richard G Candelaria (435)	PoW
13/4/45	Lt Ossie J Huval (434)	KIA
16/4/45	Lt John T Golden (434)	PoW
16/4/45	Lt Harold F Krause Jr (434)	KIA
16/4/45	Lt Donald H Stott (434)	KIA
16/4/45	Lt Frank M Taylor (434)	PoW
18/4/45	Capt Jay C Malone (436)	KIA
20/4/45	Lt Robert C Young (436)	KIFA
4/5/45	Lt Anthony J Scordino (436)	KIFA
19/7/45	Lt Hilton O Thompson (434)	KIFA

Key

- KIFA - killed in flying accident
- KIA - killed in action
- PoW - prisoner of war

COLOUR PLATES

1
P-38J-10 42-67973 of Lt Victor Wolski, 436th FS, Wattisham, May 1944
This camouflaged P-38 was initially assigned to Lt Wolski when the 436th arrived at Wattisham in the spring of 1944. It was damaged in a taxiing accident with Lt Edward Spillane at the controls on 26 May 1944 – the very day the group became operational. There is no record of its subsequent service with the 434th FS.

2
P-38J-10 (serial unknown) of Capt Robin Olds, 434th FS, Wattisham, June 1944
Olds flew four P-38s between May and September 1944, and this first aircraft lasted him through the D-Day period until he was issued with *SCAT II* (P-38J-15 43-28341), which was destroyed in a landing accident on 7 July 1944. He scored all of his P-38 kills while flying *SCAT III* during August. This aircraft is depicted in a scheme based on the recollections of SSgt Fred Hayner, the squadron artist responsible for the decoration of most 434th FS fighters.

3
P-38J-10 42-68029 of Lt Berkley E Hollister, 434th FS, Wattisham, June 1944
Named *LITTLE EDRIS* after Hollister’s wife, this P-38 was shot down by anti-aircraft fire near Montignac, in France, on 5 July 1944. Its pilot, Lt Clayton Proctor, was killed.

4
P-38J-15 43-28714 of Lt Arnold G Holding, 434th FS, Wattisham, June 1944
This P-38 was flown by Holding in May-June 1944. Its nickname, *LUCKY LADY*, ultimately proved inappropriate for Lt Leroy Lutz, who was killed when he fell victim to flak near Le Fere on 22 June 1944.

5
P-38J-25 44-23656 of Lt Richard S Spencer Jr, 436th FS, Wattisham, July 1944
Spencer enjoyed better fortune flying this P-38 than did Lt Lutz with Holding’s aircraft during the post-D-Day break-out period of July-August 1944. He emerged unhurt from the aircraft when it was damaged in a take-off accident on 14 August. 44-23656 was subsequently salvaged.

6
P-38J-15 43-28476 of Capt William M Gates, 435th FS, Wattisham, July 1944
Gates had the unusual experience of claiming credit for the destruction of a captured B-24. All three Wattisham P-38 units identified the bomber on the ground near Mulhouse, in eastern France, on 3 August 1944 when it was displaying German insignia. Gates and two or three other P-38 pilots strafed the bomber and destroyed it. *Swanee Jr* displayed reduced invasion stripes at least until the end of July 1944.

7
P-38J-15 43-28823 of Col Hubert Zemke, HQ 479th FG, Wattisham, August 1944
Col Zemke assumed command of the 479th FG on 12 August, and he flew this P-38 until early September,

when he was assigned a P-51D. Zemke’s dislike of the Lightning went back to 1942, when the 56th FG was briefly equipped with the type. His disdain for the Lockheed fighter might have been the reason why this aircraft displays little in the way of personal markings.

8
P-38J-15 42-104425 of Capt Arthur Jeffrey, 434th FS, Wattisham, August 1944
Jeffrey flew this P-38 from the time the 479th FG began operations in Europe until it was lost to flak near Darmstadt on 6 September 1944 while being flown by Lt Calvin J Murphy – the latter was killed. The aircraft enjoyed its moment of glory on 29 July 1944 when Jeffrey scored his remarkable victory over an Me 163. The fact that he registered in excess of 500 mph in a dive while pursuing the German rocket fighter raises speculation about how he would have fared if he had been flying the faster P-38J-25 model with its dive flaps and power-assisted ailerons.

9
P-38J-25 44-23663 of Lt Phillip Gossard, 435th FS, Wattisham, August 1944
Gossard flew this P-38 from the spring of 1944 until the group converted to P-51s in September/October 1944. He was credited with the destruction of an He 111 bomber on the ground at Nancy/Essey on the opening day of the period for which the 479th FG earned its Distinguished Unit Citation (18 August to 28 September 1944).

10
P-38J-15 43-28529 of Capt Hans Grasshoff, 436th FS, Wattisham, August 1944
Grasshoff started flying this P-38 when the 479th FG commenced operations just before D-Day. He scored a shared aerial victory with Lt Plunk on 24 July, when they were each given credit for the destruction of a Bf 109. Grasshoff damaged another Bf 109 on 8 August. *Zippie* was written off in a take-off accident on 18 August 1944 whilst being flown by Lt Edward Phillipow. Grasshoff duly received a new P-51D, which he named *Little Zippie*.

11
P-38J-15 43-28474 of Capt Claire A P Duffie, 434th FS, Wattisham, September 1944
This fighter was Duffie’s original operational mount, and it survived to be transferred to the 367th FG of the Ninth Air Force in October 1944. While flying this P-38, Duffie (pronounced ‘Doo-fee-ae’) shot down two Bf 109s on 25 August and another on 26 September. He added one and one shared Ju 88s on the ground on 18 August.

12
P-38J-15 43-28376 of Capt Hiram Turner, 434th FS, Wattisham, September 1944
Turner was an original member of the 434th FS when it began operations in May 1944, and he was flying 43-28376 when he was shot down by anti-aircraft fire on 15 August over Steenwijk airfield, in Holland. The ‘Elbow Room’ was a pub in Palmdale, California, which was frequented by 479th personnel during their training, and Dottie was the name of the unit’s favourite barmaid.

13
P-51D-10 44-14351 of Col Hubert Zemke, HQ 479th FG, Wattisham, September 1944
Col Zemke received his first P-51 – displaying the 435th FS’s yellow rudder – in early September 1944, but he started flying this 436th-marked example soon afterwards. Zemke favoured the P-51 over other fighters, believing that units under his command could achieve better results when equipped with the type. As if to prove this point, during his first aerial encounter with the enemy while flying the P-51 on 26 September, Zemke claimed two Bf 109s shot down and another damaged. He also shared in the destruction of a Bf 109 with Lt Norman Benoit on 7 October, but was forced down in bad weather on the 30th whilst flying this very machine. He spent the rest of the war as a PoW.

14
P-51D-10 44-14378 of Lt Ray K Friend, 435th FS, Wattisham, September 1944
Friend shot down a Bf 109 and damaged another during the 479th FG’s first Mustang engagement on 26 September 1944. This aircraft was transferred to the 77th FS/20th FG in October, and Friend was assigned another P-51D, which was named *SWEET EL II*. 44-14378 was shot down by an Me 262 near Hengelo on 1 November 1944, its pilot, Lt Denis Alison, being killed.

15
P-51D-10 44-14354 of Lt Phillip D Gossard, 435th FS, Wattisham, October 1944
This P-51 was assigned to Gossard when the 435th FS converted to the type in mid-September 1944. He flew it on operations until it was ground looped and damaged on 2 December. Gossard became tour-expired a few days later and *V for VAL* was salvaged.

16
P-51D-10 44-14212 of Lt Thomas C Olson, 434th FS, Wattisham, November 1944
Olson was one of the ETO’s highest-scoring P-38 strafing aces with 9.5 kills to his name. He also claimed one aerial victory while flying the Lightning. However, Olson’s success with the P-51 was limited to one Me 410 damaged on the ground on 27 November 1944. *LELAH MAY* was written-off in a crash-landing near Ipswich on 3 January 1945 while being flown by Lt Jerome K Nagel – the fighter had suffered engine failure in flight. 44-14212 carried the name *The Slugger* beneath its starboard exhaust stubs.

17
P-51D-20 44-63175 of Lt William H Daudistel, 434th FS, Wattisham, November 1944
Daudistel began his operational tour in October 1944, and almost certainly flew this P-51 from the start. Its artwork was applied by squadron artist SSgt Fred Hayner, although it is uncertain why the fighter’s nickname was repeated on the canopy rail. By early 1945 the lettering had begun to wear to the extent that only the ‘V’ of the name *Virgin* was visible on the nose. The nickname *Mickey’s Mustang* was applied to the right-hand side of the nose.

18
P-51D-10 44-14574 of Lt Hans J Grasshoff, 436th FS, Wattisham, November 1944

Grasshoff replaced *Zippie* with *Little ZIPPIE* in October 1944, and he was probably flying the latter when he accounted for an Fw 190 near Osnabruck on 27 November. This P-51 was passed on to Lt Raymond King when Grasshoff became tour-expired in December. King was flying it on 13 January 1945 when he was forced to ditch off Clacton after the fighter suffered a mechanical failure. He was rescued, but subsequently died from exposure.

19
P-51D-20 44-62349 of Lt Robert H Herman, 435th FS, Wattisham, November 1944
Herman began flying operations in November 1944, and used this P-51 through to war’s end. The line beneath the squadron letter ‘A’ indicates that this was the second aircraft in the unit to use this particular identification letter.

20
P-51D-10 44-14651 of Capt Berkley Hollister and Lt John C Donnell, 434th FS, Wattisham, November 1944
Donnell began his tour in September 1944, and took over 44-14651 from Hollister before the latter became tour-expired in December. Hollister asked SSgt Fred Hayner to apply the name *PIN UP GIRL* to the aircraft, and the latter also painted *Muriel of Troy* on the right-hand side in honour of his wife and home town of Troy, New York. The victory marks displayed beneath the rail indicated Hollister’s claims. Donnell perished in this machine when it was downed by flak near Dreiskau on 14 February 1945.

21
P-51D-10 44-11214 of Lt Ron C Maley, 434th FS, Wattisham, December 1944
Maley started flying P-38s in the ETO in July 1944, converting to P-51s at the end of September. He damaged three He 111s and an Fw190 on the ground and claimed a Bf 109 in the air on 26 September. He was shot down by flak in this aircraft near Scharfenberg on 5 December and became a PoW. The name *TOMMY TROJAN* was inspired by the ‘Trojans’ nickname of the University of Southern California, which Maley had previously attended.

22
P-51D-10 44-14426 of Capt Robin Olds, 434th FS, Wattisham, December 1944
Robin Olds received this P-51 in early October 1944, and he using it until 27 December, when Lt John Morrow crash-landed the fighter after running out of fuel. Olds scored his sixth aerial victory (an Fw 190) while flying 44-14426 during an escort mission to Berlin on 6 October.

23
P-51D-10 44-14532 of Lt Henry P Plunk, 436th FS, December 1944
Plunk served throughout the 479th’s operational tour from May 1944 until the end of the war. He shared in the destruction of a Bf 109 with Hans Grasshoff on 24 July while flying a P-38, but did not register any victories at the controls of *AMBROSIA*. This Mustang survived the war and was scrapped soon afterwards.

24
P-51K-5 44-11674 of Lt Col Arthur F Jeffrey, 434th FS, Wattisham, December 1944

Jeffrey received this P-51 in time to score no fewer than nine of his last ten victories while flying it. He claimed his last kill in this aircraft when he downed a Bf 109 during an escort mission on Christmas Day 1944. Subsequently reassigned to Lt Hilton Thompson, 44-11674 was eventually transferred to the 355th FG.

25

P-51D-10 44-14423 of Lt Robert I Bromschwig, 434th FS, Wattisham, December 1944
Bromschwig began his combat tour in October 1944, and he flew *Kraut Knocker* until it was damaged in an accident on 3 January 1945. He had damaged an Fw 190 in it on 1 January 1945. This fighter had originally been flown by Maj Jeffrey.

26

P-51K-5 44-11746 of Capt Robin Olds, 434th FS, Wattisham, January 1945
This P-51 (fitted with the slightly enlarged canopy seen on some K-model Mustangs) was allocated to Olds at the beginning of 1945, and he flew the aircraft until it was written off after sustaining substantial battle damage during an escort mission to Neuminster on 13 April 1945. Whilst destroying an Arado Ar 234 on the ground at Lubeck-Blankensee and damaging an Me 410 at Tarnewitz, one of the P-51’s flaps had been shot off and the wing holed by hits from several anti-aircraft shells. In all, seven air and three ground claims were recorded with this P-51, thus making it Olds’ most successful aircraft. He was flying *Scat VII* when he made his last claims, and this aircraft is reputed to have survived the war and been brought back to the US for display, only to be lost in a fatal crash on 20 February 2003.

27

P-51D-10 44-14392 of Lt Norman Benoit, 435th FS, Wattisham, December 1944
Benoit began his tour with the 435th FS in June 1944 while flying P-38s. He finished flying combat missions in February 1945, at which point *VICTORY QUEEN* was handed over to Lt Robert Baird, who renamed it *Apple Knocker*. The P-51 survived the war and was stricken off-charge by the 479th.

28

P-51D-10 44-14327 of Col Kyle L Riddle, HQ, 479th FG, Wattisham, December 1944
Col Riddle evaded capture after being shot down in August, and he had returned to the 479th FG by late September. Riddle resumed command of the group after Zemke became a PoW, and by early November 1944 he was flying this P-51. It was apparently maintained by the 435th FS, as it displays that unit’s markings. Riddle’s only aerial victory credit was an Fw 190 during an escort mission to Berlin on 5 December 1944 – a particularly successful one for the group, which claimed to have shot down 15 enemy aircraft.

29

P-51D-15 44-15380 of Lt Gail E Jacobson, 434th FS, Wattisham, December 1944
Jacobson began his tour in September 1944, and downed two Fw 190s on 5 December and a third on the 23rd. *Burn ‘n Bernie* was damaged in a landing accident on 25 December after Jacobson had claimed the probable destruction of a Bf 109.

30

P-51D-15 44-15317 of Lt Eugene Sears, 434th FS, Wattisham, January 1945
Sears began his operational tour in September 1944, and continued combat flying until war’s end. He applied his own personal decorations to “*American MAID*”, as well as to two other group aircraft.

31

P-51D-15 44-15086 of Lt John W Morrow, 434th FS, Wattisham, January 1945
Morrow began flying combat missions in P-38s with the 434th FS in July 1944. Assigned P-51D 44-14629 *Shoo Shoo Baby* in the autumn, he switched to this aircraft towards the end of the year. *CACTUS Jack* was damaged in a taxiing accident on 3 February 1945 and transferred to the 436th FS. It was struck off charge on 3 April 1945.

32

P-51D-20 44-63192 of Lt Arlett G Mosier, 436th FS, Wattisham, January 1945
My BEST BETT was allocated to Mosier in October 1944. He had started flying P-38s in June, and continued with this Mustang until he handed it over to another pilot in the spring of 1945.

33

P-51D-10 44-14740 of Lt George W Gleason, 434th FS, Wattisham, January 1945
Gleason named his aircraft after his wife Todd, and it was while flying it in combat for the first time that he became an ace when he downed an Fw 190 and a Bf 109 during an escort mission to Brunswick on 28 September 1944 – he had claimed three kills in a P-38 48 hours earlier. Gleason claimed a further seven victories between 23 December and 9 February 1945, by which time his score stood at 12 aerial and three strafing kills. *HOT TODDY* was lost to flak at Erferding airfield on 16 April 1945 while being flown by Lt Frank Taylor, who became a PoW.

34

P-51D-10 44-14645 of Capt Claire A P Duffie, 436th FS, Wattisham, February 1945
Duffie flew this Mustang when he was transferred to the 436th in December 1944. He had scored three aerial and 1.5 strafing victories by the time he left the 434th. Various sources credit him with a total of 11.5 kills. He was allocated his final P-51 in April, handing *Give ‘Em Hell for H L Jr* over to another pilot who flew it until war’s end.

35

P-51D-20 44-72431 of Lt Ernest J Hopcroft, 436th FS, Wattisham, March 1945
Hopcroft began his tour in November 1944, receiving this P-51 late in March 1945. It was passed on to the Swedish Air Force post-war.

36

P-51D-20 44-73138 of Capt Verne E Hooker, 435th FS, Wattisham, April 1945
Hooker flew with the 479th FG for the whole of its operational tour in Europe from May 1944 until war’s end. He gained two aerial and two shared ground victories, and both the P-51s he flew survived the war.

479th FG HERALDRY

1

479th FG
The 479th FG’s original heraldry was devised by an anonymous unit artist some time in 1945. The original motto was *lcimus Ut Unum* (‘We strike as one’), although neither image nor motto were ever officially approved. Another insignia and the more sedate motto, *Protectores liberatis* (‘Defenders of Liberty’) were approved in 1954. The 1945 shield displayed a central dagger in white, surrounded by white-edged red flames. The rays extending from the flame represented the group (white), the 434th FS (red), the 435th FS (yellow) and the 436th FS (black).

2 and 3

434th FS (early and late versions)
SSgts Fred Hayner and Fredric Richmond were responsible for the double devil on a white cloud against a blue sky insignia. This image was approved by the Eighth Air Force on 7 July 1944, and it remained the official 434th FS heraldry after the war. Robin Olds was responsible for the subsequent design following the unit’s conversion to the Mustang. The various elements refer to youth, aggressiveness and devotion to duty. The motto, *Tutor And Ultor* (‘Protect and Avenge’) was approved earlier for another unit.

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4

435th FS
435th FS pilot Lt Billy Means devised the eagle emblem, which was officially approved on 20 March 1945. The American eagle is depicted clutching a machine gun, which represented the P-51 Mustang’s primary striking power. The black and white eagle with yellow beak and feet was displayed on a blue disc with a black border and white piping. Beneath the eagle’s feet was a small white cloud, with white stars over its head and a large grey machine gun tucked under the eagle’s left wing emitting yellow and orange fire.

5

436th FS
The insignia of a ferocious black cat with white wings, holding a yellow lightning bolt on a blue field was designed by squadron pilot Lt Hans Grasshoff. It was intended to represent the speed and striking power of the Lightning, although it also applied to the Mustang too. Another squadron emblem was approved in December 1954, depicting an ace of spades with a winged sword pointed downwards on an air force blue disc. The motto, *Semper Primus* (‘Always First’) was ultimately adopted.

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